



Parti Sosialis Malaysia



Socialist Perspectives

10

Parsosma Enterprise

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Published in August 2017 by

Parsosma Enterprise

2A, Jalan Sitiawan

Lim Gardens

30100 Ipoh, Perak

Malaysia.

Front and back cover photos: Choo Chon Kai

Indigenous people's march on Earth Day 2017 in Tanah Rata, Cameron Highlands.

Printed by Jutaprint

2 Solok Sungai Pinang 3, Sg. Pinang

11600 Penang, Malaysia.

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Call off the Telom hydroelectric project

B. Suresh Kumar

TENAGA Nasional Berhad (TNB) decided to develop a hydroelectric project in Pos Lanai, Pahang about six years ago. Pos Lanai is in Kuala Lipis district but is included within the Cameron Highlands parliamentary constituency. Although 300 or so Orang Asli families would have to be relocated as the 50-metre-high Telom dam would flood their ancestral lands, they were not consulted about this project until after the decision to proceed was finalised.

The local Orang Asli community first heard of this project in a briefing session in March 2013 when Ghazat Awang, the Head of the Planning and Feasibility Division of TNB, briefed the Tok Batin and the JKKK (village committee) members of Kg Pantos. This was followed by meetings with the other Tok Batins and JKKKs in Pos Lanai, some of which were attended by the Umno state assemblyman of Jelai Dato Sri Wan Rosdy Wan Ismail, an exco member of the Pahang state government.

Generally, in Malaysia, the Tok Batins, who are appointed and paid a monthly stipend by the Department of Orang Asli Development, tend

to be very docile and acquiesce to whatever the government requests. The abovementioned briefing sessions did not open up space to discuss the negative impacts that this project might have on the local population and the environment. Neither did the Tok Batins of Pos Lanai call general meetings in the various kampungs to inform the local population of the proposed dam project or to foster a discussion about its pros and cons.

It was against this background of lack of information on the government's plans that Universiti Teknologi Mara was commissioned by TNB to conduct a survey on the views of the Pos Lanai Orang Asli community in mid-2014. They conducted interview sessions with some people in Kg Pantos asking about land ownership and use, and came up with the finding that the local community were not particularly attached to the land they were on and were prepared to move. It was a rather surprising finding, given that communal land is central to the economy, culture and value system of indigenous communities the world over.

In August 2014, TNB brought the State Director of

the Department of Orang Asli Development and the Orang Asli Senator Mohammad Olian Abdullah to advise the local community to accept the relocation proposal.

Formation of the Pos Lanai Communal Land Action Committee

Several individuals from the local community were unhappy with the manner in which the project was being pushed through without much information. They formed an action committee in mid-2014 to find out more, to inform their people and to promote a two-way discussion with the authorities. On 10 November 2014, they sent a letter to the state assemblyman Dato Sri Wan Rosdy and the Member of Parliament for Cameron Highlands Dato Sri G. Palanivel asking for a discussion but these requests were ignored. Apparently the authorities prefer to deal with the more compliant Tok Batins and the JKKKs who are quite subservient to the Department of Orang Asli Development.

The action committee found out through their own researches that the proposed Telom dam would flood about

Mode of Electricity Generation	CO ₂ emission in pound per kilowatt-hr of electricity generated
Mini hydro-electric dams	0.01 – 0.03
Large hydro-electric dams that submerge forests	0.5
Natural gas	0.6 – 2.0
Coal	1.4 – 3.6

7,600 hectares, including much of the communal land of the local Orang Asli population. They also found that this hydroelectric project was fairly inefficient – projected to generate only 132 MW of electricity despite flooding such a large area of land. The Ulu Jelai dam located on a more hilly area just 50 km away is expected to generate 372 MW despite flooding only 130 hectares. In terms of the forest area to be submerged to generate 1 MW of electricity, the projections are 1 MW:0.35 ha for Jelai compared with 1 MW:57.6 ha for Tenom.

The action committee then mobilised the local population to block the project by preventing access to the area and by filing police reports. They also brought the issue to the Malaysian Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) and highlighted it in the papers.

Court injunction

As they were not making much headway in their quest to renegotiate the necessity of the hydroelectric project, the action committee contacted the Cameron Highlands branch of Parti Sosialis Malaysia. After a

series of visits and discussions with the affected community, a decision was taken to go to court to stop the project and force the authorities to discuss the matter in a more thorough manner.

KL-based lawyer Yudistra Darma Dorai agreed to represent the Pos Lanai Orang Asli community on a pro bono basis. We filed for an injunction in the KL High Court in May 2015 asking for cessation of all preparatory work pending further discussion. This was granted in September 2015 by Justice Noraini Abdul Rahman. This was a great victory for the local population. They had stopped a huge, well-connected government-linked company (GLC) and paved the way for a more thorough review of the project.

However, in September 2016 the TNB lawyers managed to transfer the case to the Temerloh High Court and file an ex parte action to injunct the action committee (the second injunction) from obstructing the work of the TNB contractors. The Temerloh High Court ruled that the first injunction granted by the KL High Court was

specifically pertaining to work on the Telom dam. He accepted the TNB argument that the work that TNB was now doing in Pos Lanai was in relation to another dam about 50 km away! This other dam was never even mentioned in the KL High Court hearings.

In December 2016, the action committee took a decision to withdraw the case at the Temerloh High Court and attempt to re-file it at the KL High Court because of concerns over the judge’s comments during the course of hearing the people’s challenge to the second injunction. Among others, the judge had commented:

- That the Ulu Jelai hydroelectric project was environmentally friendly. Apparently the judge was accepting TNB’s assertions at face value.
- The judge tended to refer to the action committee members as “*kuncu-kuncu*” (agents/thugs) while he referred to the TNB contractors as “*wakil*” (representatives).
- That Jeffry Hassan, the chairman of the action committee and the named plaintiff in the case, was

acting out of self-interest and jeopardising national interest.

- That about 1,000 individuals in the local community had agreed to be relocated to make way for the project.

Large hydroelectric dams are not environmentally friendly

Large dams contribute to global warming in two ways. Firstly, they destroy the forests that serve as “carbon sinks” to absorb heat-trapping atmospheric carbon dioxide and convert it into oxygen. Secondly, as the organic material submerged by the dam decays, it produces methane, which is an even more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. It is thus a gross error to consider hydroelectricity as a clean source of power as the chart overleaf demonstrates.

The Telom dam would create the third largest hydroelectric-related lake in Peninsular Malaysia. The area submerged would be the size of Labuan. The larger the area submerged, the worse the impact on the environment. Unfortunately we do not have an independent body that can assess and evaluate whether any hydroelectric project proposed is worth the environmental costs.

Are there hidden agendas?

It is difficult to explain why TNB is so keen on continuing with the Telom dam, which would submerge so

much more forest than the Ulu Jelai dam. There are some who speculate that there are powerful interest groups who are keen on the opportunity to log the 7,600 hectares of land that would be submerged. There are megabucks to be made by the companies that win this logging contract.

Or is gold the cause? The Orang Asli have noted that a company named Rosmal (M) Sdn Bhd has been surveying the area around their current village. They have heard that it has won the licence to prospect for gold during the period it will take for the dam to be built. After all, the Selinsing gold mine is located only 50 km away.

An appeal for help

The Orang Asli community of Pos Lanai are fighting to preserve their traditional way of life that is interwoven with the land and the forest. They are up against the combined might of a rich GLC, the Pahang state government (which is desirous of awarding logging and mining contracts for the area that will be flooded) and the federal government. In this struggle they are also standing up against the wanton destruction of our forests which will lead to higher greenhouse gas emissions.

But it is a very unequal fight, and in real life David often loses to Goliath. That is why we appeal to you to contribute to the fighting fund of the Pos Lanai community. Donations can be banked into

Pos Lanai, Maybank account number 556048056948. This is a bank account created specifically for the Pos Lanai battle, and details should be emailed to me at sukucomp@gmail.com so that we can acknowledge your contribution with a receipt.

Suresh Kumar is the Secretary of PSM Cameron Highlands.

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The inalienable rights of forests

Afandi Ahmad

FORESTS have inalienable rights. The forest engages us in many ways. It is the home of many indigenous communities. It is the love of our children. It is sacred. It is art. It is a stress-reliever. It is silence and meditation. It strengthens our sense of interconnectedness and interdependence. It makes life possible in urban areas. It is awe-inspiring. It protects. It provides. It sustains. It nurtures. Any natural forest is a valuable social, cultural, economic, religious and spiritual asset to local and global, urban, rural and indigenous communities.

Unfortunately, it is also just another commodity for a resource-hungry, resource-heavy human economy, which has led to the current levels of deforestation and degradation of natural forests in Malaysia and the world. This has reached an alarming stage of unsustainability. The concern for our forests is no more national. Today it is certainly a trans-boundary, planetary concern. It is, in a sense, *mother of all concerns* ... for if we destroy our forests, we will



Forests provide, nurture and sustain.

make Mother Earth uninhabitable to all the unique species that populate it. It is important and urgent to recognise that more and more people are beginning to view it as a *global eco-emergency*.

Deforestation has led, and continues to lead, to a number of critical consequences, both in and across time and space, affecting us both geographically and inter-generationally.

There is mounting loss of biodiversity and indigenous cultures, increasing replace-

ment of natural forest with “monoculture, cash-crop forests”, increase in water-soil instability, growing incidence of flash floods, intensification of global climate change, disappearance of forest-based sustainable livelihoods, growing destruction of forest homes of indigenous peoples, loss of traditional knowledge pertaining to herbs with preventive and curative pharmaceutical import, loss of the ethnobotanical (medicinal plants) knowledge, culture, heritage, customs, rituals and

beliefs of the Orang Asal, and irreversible destruction of national and global natural heritage. We are on the way to creating a future without natural forests.

The massive loss of natural forest areas in Malaysia is largely attributed to commercial logging and the development of monoculture, cash-crop plantations (specifically oil palm). These plantations mostly cover the environmentally fragile wetlands and include to an extent protected forests. Ecological destruction and injustice to forest communities and future generations may likely continue in the future unless the following unsustainable trends are checked:

- a. Widespread logging in our natural forest reserves and forested areas;
- b. Expansion of unsustainable development activities (construction of roads to deep forest areas, mining, introduction of non-native species within forest reserves, aquaculture within mangrove forests, etc);
- c. Conversion of peat forests to oil palm plantations;
- d. Large-scale clearing of highland ridges for vegetable farming; and
- e. Invasion of settlements of all Malaysian indigenous communities to meet economic development needs.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to declare a

National Deforestation and Forest Degradation Eco-Emergency. The declaration of an Emergency requires a heightened and urgent sense of political and public purpose. The special legal and institutional framework under the National Eco-Emergency will allow us to work immediately and effectively towards reversing the trend and building our natural heritage as a significant contribution to ecological stability at local, national and global levels. It will also provide critical support for the ecological movement.

Declaration of the Eco-Emergency by the Federal Government immediately requires:

- a. Constitution of an all-stakeholders committee (led by an indigenous leader).
- b. Emergency period with definite time frame, performance indicators and termination.
- c. Innovative and transparent national legal instruments and institutional structures.
- d. Communication, educational and people participation strategies and exercises.
- e. Internal and external audit.

To strengthen the National Eco-Emergency, the complete dedicated involvement of our parliamentarians, politicians and leaders of national civil society organisations is needed. Living, vibrant natural forests must be part of

our national future. It will be good to witness all these national groupings mutually work and support each other in taking and implementing the pledge.

The Eco-Manifesto proposes five pledge areas:

- a. ***Spirit of Sustainability.***
We need a sustainable non-sectarian mindset, framework and practice at all levels of our personal, professional and national lives.
- b. ***Indigenous Peoples.*** The right of indigenous peoples to their ancestral land is a pre-existing right that cannot be extinguished and that must be recognised and access to natural resources guaranteed. They are peoples with a past, present and future, in which they are an integral part of the forest they live in. They have inalienable rights, which governments should recognise, protect and nurture.
- c. ***People's Participation.***
In all matters relating to the natural forests, people should be actively involved in decision-making, thus operationalising the practice of democracy. The first group of people to be involved should be those who will be affected, the 'victims' of a development change, not a group of external stakeholders. All efforts to 'modernise' must be made in terms of

the people who will be affected.

d. **Global Conventions.**

Malaysia is a signatory to a number of global treaties and conventions that protect our forests. It is also a signatory to those conventions that promote democracy. All these must be raised to popular consciousness and implemented. We need performance indicators for people to know that we are pursuing this global commitment in spirit and letter.

e. **Inter-Party Eco-Platform.**

It will be an important step for political parties, and supporting national civil society organisations, to come together for our national, natural forests with a single non-sectarian voice. A platform will help build a national consensus for our forests and for democracy.

Specifically what needs

to be done is:

a. **Political Will:**

Reassess our national political will, and political institutions supporting it, in relation to deforestation and natural forest degradation. We need to work out a “Political Will Index”.

b. **Forest Governance Performance Index:**

Regular release of national governance performance in relation to our natural forests and in particular to the defo-

restation and natural forest degradation trends.

c. **Media Alerts:** Regular institutionally supported and mandated alerts and publicity of the ‘worst offenders’ (in relation to definite criteria) in destroying our forests. The alerts should also cover those MPs/politicians who have a track record of not attending to issues of destruction of our forests in their constituencies.

d. **Ban on Poisons:** Adopt an absolute ban on the use of pesticides and toxic substances in forestry. Hold media publicity campaigns for non-compliance.

e. **Independent Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA):** Involvement of independent EIA agencies to complement current forest conservation measures.

f. **Monitoring and Comprehensive Assessment:** Carry out a results-oriented comprehensive assessment of forest restoration needs and nationally prioritise their localities.

g. **Forest Rehabilitation Service:** Forest rehabilitation activities by encouraging greater employment of local labour, organised community (especially citizens of a constituency) participation and student involvement as “forest rehabilitation service”.

The way forward

Our natural forests are our national heritage. And our forests and all their inhabitants have rights. We must recognise this and act accordingly. We need to conceive future scenarios where the forests are essential components. It all means (i) first taking stock of the situation, (ii) arresting deforestation and forest degradation trends and (iii) nurturing the forests. It also means rethinking our economic development strategy, reviewing our short-sighted “forest as commodity” mentality and reassessing our lifestyles that have made the forest a victim of our wants and greed.

As a nation, to make all these happen, we need to have an active, sustainable and transparent governance framework. We must also recognise the importance of our forests beyond our borders. This calls not only for “planetary consciousness” but also for “ecological citizenship” (the basis of a sustainable society). At the root of these is political will. It must be uncompromising when it comes to protecting and nurturing our natural forests, not only for those of us here today but also for our children who will shape our future, not only for those in Malaysia but also for the people of the world.

Excerpted from a paper presented by Afandi Ahmad, exco member of KUASA, at the Socialism 2016 conference held in Kuala Lumpur on 25-27 November 2016.

Rampant deforestation in Lojing, Camerons

FRUSTRATION and disappointment with rampant deforestation was what brought a group of 40 Orang Asli all the way from 12 villages in Lojing, Gua Musang, Kelantan, to Kuala Lumpur on 25 January 2017. They are part of a network of Orang Asli villages in and around Cameron Highlands that Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM) has been working with for the past few years.

“Our village is getting narrower, day by day, because of the rampant logging,” charged Rada Jambu, the Tok Batin of Kampung Sigar in Lojing. According to him, logging companies are cutting down trees that are as close as 10 metres from the homes of the Orang Asli in Kampung Sigar and Kampung Sendrod. Pointing to the green areas on a map of Kampung Sigar, Rada said that the village is part of the Lojing permanent forest reserve but only a small area is now left untouched. “There is no more forest reserve, and plastic buildings are found everywhere,” he said. He was referring to the large number of greenhouses for the commercial cultivation of vegetables



Muya, a leader of the Lojing community.

and flowers that dominate the landscape of Lojing.

The map also marked the locations and names of the rivers in Kampung Sigar which Rada said had been used by his ancestors from generations ago. Rada also said that the villagers could no longer drink water from those rivers as they were now contaminated. “The water has become murky, like teh tarik, and we cannot drink from the rivers because companies like Sigar Highlands are damaging the forests,” he said.

Angah Pandak, another Tok Batin from Kampung Kuala Tahu, said that 3,000 hectares of the Orang Asli’s

land around his village had been licensed out by the government to businessmen to cultivate vegetables. Angah said the houses of the Orang Asli were destroyed when the forest was cleared and that those from Kampung Kuala Tahu had to move north after they were chased out of their village. “Without the forest, how are we going to look for food and medicine? We want the government to return the 3,000 hectares of our land and they can have the rest of the land,” said Angah.

The coordinator of the Orang Asli network in Lojing, Muya Bahsaid, added that the Orang Asli were chased out of



Presenting complaint to SUHAKAM.

Kampung Kuala Tahu by Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (Jako) back in 2000.

According to him, numerous memoranda had been submitted by the Orang

Asli villagers to the authorities, including to the Menteri Besar of Kelantan in 2014, but their complaints fell on deaf ears!

Meanwhile the destruction of the forests and eviction

of Orang Asli is ongoing.

The Tok Batin of Kampung Sendrod, Anis Akai, said the 800 Orang Asli living in the village could now only live on the small area of land they had. "They have destroyed the graves of our ancestors and now all 800 of us are living on a narrow strip of land between vegetable farms," said Anis. He added that there was no land to build more houses.

PSM Secretary-General A. Sivarajan urged the Malaysian Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) to respond urgently to the complaints contained in their memo-randum to Suhakam, pointing out that this was the situation for Orang Asli all over the country and not a matter confined to Lojing.

"No state government should adopt any enactment or policy or issue logging licences that violate the communal lands of the Orang Asli."

He urged Suhakam to start a public inquiry on the deforestation and violation of Orang Asli rights in Lojing and to have all logging activities stopped until investigations are completed.

The above is adapted from an article by Yeong Hui Min published in Malaysiakini (26 January 2017).



After stopping a bulldozer clearing their land.

End fossil-fuel dependence, a coal-free ASEAN now!

Statement released at ASEAN Summit, April 2017

WE, civil society organisations, peoples organisations and advocates for climate, the environment, clean energy, and human rights across Southeast Asia, in solidarity with and echoing the call of the region's vulnerable and impoverished sectors, are alarmed by the energy policies by all ASEAN member governments, continuing fossil-fuel dependence in the region, despite its various environmental, economic, and social costs.

Aside from boosting support and encouragement for oil and gas, Southeast Asian governments are set to increase the region's coal dependence for its energy requirements with 125 GW of coal in the pipeline. According to the International Energy Agency, coal is projected to have the highest share in Southeast Asia's energy mix by 2040, with the share of coal in power generation rising from 32% to 50%, contrary to the trend seen in most other parts of the world.

We reject ASEAN's support for coal considering the vulnerability of the region's countries to the effects of climate change, accentuated by the successive climate-related disasters in the past years. We find it contradictory to the commitment professed by all

ASEAN member governments in signing the Paris Agreement on the Climate, committing to keep the world below the aspirational target of 1.5 degrees Celsius global average temperature [increase] through decarbonisation.

We reject ASEAN's support for coal considering the global trend of abandoning new coal projects and retiring old coal power plants. For the past year, there has been a global drop in different stages of coal construction, with a 48% drop in pre-construction activity, a 62% drop in construction starts, and a 19% drop in ongoing construction. Coal plant retirements are taking place at an unprecedented pace, with 64 GW of retirements in the past two years, mainly in the European Union and the United States.

The decreasing support for coal by the rest of the world is owed largely to the voice and engagement of communities and civil society who have been in the forefront in resisting coal projects for its adverse health, environmental and social impacts. Already, Southeast Asia as a region has had the most growth in per capita emissions since 1990, with over 140% growth in pollution. These emissions are only set to

double by 2040. This is disturbing considering a recent study which found that allowing proposed new coal plants to continue would lead to 55,000 pollution-related deaths per year by 2040.

We see these developments as contrary to the promise of "lean and green ASEAN with fully established mechanisms for sustainable development to ensure the protection of the region's environment, the sustainability of its natural resources, and the high quality of life of its peoples," mentioned in the ASEAN Vision 2025. They also run in contrast with the pronouncement of ASEAN nations in the 2016 Conference of Parties to the UNFCCC in Marrakech, which recognised the extreme vulnerability of Southeast Asian nations and the need to scale up commitments on mitigation and climate action.

These developments and positions held by ASEAN nations regarding dirty energy are unacceptable given the drastic reduction in the price of renewable energy, especially wind and solar energy approximating the costs of electricity generation coal investments. Last year, solar energy prices in China, India,

Brazil and 55 other emerging market economies have dropped to about one third of its price in 2010, largely due to China's massive deployment of solar, and the assistance it had provided to other countries financing their own solar projects.

We recognise that at present, there is a need for sustaining the energy needs of the Southeast Asian peoples, with over 120 million of the region's population having no access to electricity. We also recognise the need for development in Southeast Asian countries. However, ASEAN member countries are not exempted from their responsibility to mitigate emissions, especially as the window for responsive climate action is shrinking by the moment, and Southeast Asian peoples are among those on the frontline of climate disasters. Responding to the prevalence of energy poverty and the urgency of mitigation and climate action go hand-in-hand.

ASEAN governments cannot simply hide behind the right to develop at the expense of the peoples' survival, needs, and rights, especially with the already proven people-centred, community-based renewable energy in increasing clean and safe energy access, providing vast opportunities for employment, and as well as fuelling sustainable development, in order to meet the demands of the people, without the fatal costs to health, livelihood, and the environment inherent in coal.

We therefore call upon

ASEAN, led by its Chairperson, President Rodrigo Duterte, to fulfill the following demands:

1. To end the age of fossil-fuel dependency in Southeast Asia through example. We call on ASEAN governments to immediately put a stop to the expansion of coal in the region by cancelling future coal projects, as well as removing all public financing and subsidies to coal.
2. To begin the transition from coal towards people-centred, community-based renewable energy systems.
 - a. To refrain from funding and supporting false solutions to the peoples' climate and energy concerns, such as large hydrodams and nuclear power plants which only exacerbate the vulnerabilities and reinforce preexisting environmental and social ills at the expense of Southeast Asian peoples.
 - b. To stop perpetuating the myth of "clean coal" technology, which not only fails in addressing the need for mitigation, but also in removing the environmental, health, and climate hazards posed by coal.
3. To walk its talk with respect to the climate by mitigating emissions by increasing the ambition of their nationally determined contributions

(NDCs), reflective of the urgency and necessity of responsive climate actions, and to follow through with corresponding adjustments to its economic and development policies.

4. To reflect the call of vulnerable countries in demanding rich countries to recognise their historical responsibility in the climate crisis by scaling up ambition and delivering on climate finance, technology transfer and capacity building.
5. To commit to their fair share of contributions to climate action and not make these fair shares conditional to finance. ASEAN countries must not make their fair share of climate action conditional to support from developed countries.

Finally, we invite ASEAN governments to consider the future generations of Southeast Asia as a basis for their decisions with respect to the climate, the environment, energy and development. What is at stake is not just the world we live in, but the world we leave behind. And we urge ASEAN leaders to choose to leave behind a world wherein those who come after us can thrive, survive, and live in harmony with the Earth, as we aspire to live in harmony across nations.

Statement released by the Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF) on 29/4/2017 in conjunction with ASEAN Summit in Philippines.

Fidel Castro's green legacy

Stephen Zunes

WHILE he no longer held any formal position of power since his resignation as President for health reasons eight years ago, Fidel Castro's death in November 2016 marked the passing of an era. Few individuals have had such a profound influence on a country for good or ill. In his nearly 50 years in power Castro left plenty of both.

Though certainly not to be taken literally, there is a certain truth to the saying "All the good things you've heard about Cuba are true. And all the bad things you've heard about Cuba are true." Though Cubans have a per capita income well under 10% of that of the United States, they now have a longer life expectancy and lower infant mortality rate. The population constantly has to deal with shortages, inefficiencies and a maddening bureaucracy, yet the government provides free education at all levels, free food allocations, free healthcare, heavily subsidised utilities and inexpensive housing.

Here in the United States, there was a lot of attention to Castro's repression of dissidents and other authoritarian practices, but those pale in comparison with many of the right-wing regimes in Latin



Fidel Castro in 1995.

America which were supported by the United States during most of Castro's time in power and with many governments elsewhere supported by Washington to this day. Indeed, other communist countries – such as the far more repressive China – have enjoyed normal relations with the United States while Cuba has been singled out for sanctions, travel bans and other restrictions, only some of which have been partially relaxed under President Barack Obama.

Castro's biggest test was in the 1990s, when the sudden end of large-scale aid and subsidised trade with the Eastern Bloc, combined with increased sanctions from the United States, led to a severe economic crisis. His response – which history may judge as

perhaps his greatest legacy – was to launch an ambitious programme in organic agriculture, environmental planning, renewable energy and other sustainable development practices. Unable to obtain fuel, chemical fertilisers, pesticides, motor vehicles and other items on which they depended, Cubans faced a potential catastrophe. Castro's response, in the words of Peter Rosset of the Institute for Food and Development Policy, was "the largest conversion from conventional agriculture to organic or semi-organic farming that the world has ever known."

Following an 80% drop in the availability of chemical pesticides and a 50% drop in petroleum for agriculture, Cuban farmers actually

increased the quantity and quality of crop yields at lower costs and with fewer health and environmental side-effects. Fungi, nematodes, wasps and ants have all been deployed for pest control. Much of this has been developed in cottage industries led by scientists in this poor but highly educated society.

In addition, Cuba began moving away from the monoculture model – based on exports of sugar and tobacco – to growing more food crops, particularly soybeans. Crop rotation, intercropping and soil conservation efforts are widespread. Urban agriculture provides for much of the food needs of city residents. After several years of food shortages and vitamin deficiencies in the 1990s, Cubans are now healthier because of their increased consumption of organic vegetables and decreased consumption of red meat. Farmworkers especially report a dramatic improvement in health, due to their reduced exposure to pesticides and herbicides

The shortage of fuel also led to a switch to renewable energy sources. There are now nearly 10,000 operating windmills and a growth in solar energy. Biomass generators now supply nearly 15% of the country's electricity. There are hundreds of small hydroelectric facilities, mostly in isolated mountainous regions. Virtually all of the country's sugar mills are now powered by waste from the cane. Solar ovens and other appropriate technologies are now commonplace in rural areas. Significantly, even when

cheap oil from Venezuela became available and access to chemical agents improved, these green innovations remained in place.

While many countries have been destroying their rainforests at an alarming rate, Cuba has made a conscious effort to reverse that trend through large-scale reforestation programmes, which include the planting of a rich variety of native species. Forested areas have more than doubled since the 1959 revolution. One of the byproducts of the reforestation efforts is that Cuba is now a leading biotechnology centre for medicines derived from tropical plants. There has been a dramatic increase in the use of herbal medicines and a return to some proven folk remedies.

As Cubans have grown less reliant on centralised sources for energy and agricultural inputs and more reliant on local sources, political decision-making has become more decentralised. Most state farms have become cooperatives run by the farmers themselves, and an increasing degree of political control now rests with democratically elected local administrations. Though the Cuban government has remained authoritarian in many respects, the trend towards a more democratic socialism on the local level has brought new life to a country that for decades had stagnated under a rigid, hierarchical state bureaucracy.

Obama has been unable to restore normal trade relations with Cuba as a result of the

Helms-Burton Act, signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1996, which requires that strict sanctions stay in place not just until Cuba allows for free democratic elections, but until the country “is substantially moving toward a market-oriented economic system.” So, even if Cuba eventually becomes a fully functioning democracy but still opts for a socialist economy, strict US sanctions would remain.

It was ironic that pressure against Cuba increased as Fidel Castro began to move away from the old rigid communist development strategies to embracing green development. Yet perhaps Washington sees a green Cuba as a bigger threat than a red Cuba. The communist model was clearly unsustainable on many levels. Yet a green model actually serves as viable alternative to the foreign-investment-driven, capital-intensive model promoted by the United States, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation. Indeed, Cuba may constitute the threat of a good example, which is perhaps the biggest threat of all.

Castro's ecological innovations were made more out of necessity than by design. However, sooner or later, if we are to survive as a planet, all countries will eventually have to make the transition to a more environmentally sustainable economy. – *National Catholic Reporter* (9 December 2016)

Stephen Zunes is a professor of politics and international studies at the University of San Francisco in the US.

Semenyih Estate: Settlement of a 13-year dispute

S. Arutchelvan

AFTER 13 long years, 21 former plantation workers representing 17 families from Semenyih Estate finally reached a settlement agreement with ex-employer Sime Darby. Following years of tough negotiations, both parties agreed to ink the agreement on 28 February 2017. Under the agreement, the ex-workers were given a decent one-and-a-half-storey low-cost terrace house with a lot size of 990 square feet.

The new permanent houses will be just 100 metres away from their current estate houses, on a prime piece of land. After a RM7,000 subsidy, the houses will be sold at a price of RM35,000. Other compensation earned under this tough settlement will enable these estate workers to move into their new homes in 32 months without paying a single sen. Meanwhile the workers will be paid rental until their new homes are ready. In addition, they will also be paid their long-pending termination and layoff benefits which had been withheld by the company since 2004.

The workers who had left the estate earlier would also be entitled to a house, which they



Signing of agreement with Sime Darby.

can buy at a subsidised rate. This matter will be resolved at a later period when the houses are nearer completion. These workers have cause to be thankful to the remaining 17 families who stood their ground until the settlement was signed.

The settlement was a well-earned reward for the 17 families, who had refused to leave the plantation when they were given the termination and eviction notice in 2004.

Eviction notice after GE

I still remember. On 21 March 2004, we had our 11th general election, which Barisan Nasional won handsomely with 198 seats compared with the

opposition's 20 seats. Just days after that, the Semenyih Estate workers were handed termination of service notices. It appears that the plantation owner was just waiting for the election to be over – evicting them before the polls would not have been good for the ruling party.

So the company issued the termination notice to more than 40 workers on 1 April 2004 and it was no April Fool's joke. But that was not the biggest shock of the day. The most active member of the estate community, Mathuraveeran, who was the union secretary as well as the temple chairman, passed away the same day. It was a double

blow. While recalling this event at the signing ceremony for the settlement agreement, Mathuraveeran's widow Munichy shed tears. Perhaps Mathuraveeran was looking down with pride from above.

After the termination notice was issued, the struggle started. The workers remember that the estate manager as well as the clerk had on numerous occasions told them that they would be given houses when the estate was redeveloped. But these verbal promises were not kept. Under intense pressure from the estate manager who pushed them to leave, the people were divided. Gradually some started to move out because they were told that if they refused to do so, they would not be paid retrenchment benefits. There were also rumours that the water and electricity supply would soon be disconnected.

A meeting was arranged between the Malayan Agricultural Producers Association (MAPA) and the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW) but a solution could not be found. The union asked for ex gratia payments (in addition to the 20 days' wages per year of service as specified in the Employment Act) and housing as a settlement but MAPA disagreed, saying that they were not obliged under the law to build houses. Four local union leaders attended but their status was as silent observers; their views were not taken into consideration. The meeting between the workers' union and the plantation owners

broke down. After the estate stopped operations, the national union slowly faded away from the scene.

This was when the workers approached PSM. We used to give free tuition for the plantation kids in the local Tamil school and circulate a monthly magazine called *Pattali* (worker) which discussed plantation workers' issues.

New committee

The Semenyih Estate Ex-Plantation Workers Committee was formed, made up of the ex-estate workers and their children. Some of these younger people were already active in our youth club Kelab Peka Tegas Ikhlas. It took a few years for the plantation owners to accept the committee because they had been used to working with the union.

Around 2008, the sale of land close to the workers' homes brought much hardship as huge lorries came in to carry out massive earthworks for the Tiara East and Diamond City luxury projects by developers Kueen Lai, Mayland and Country Garden. The plantation workers who had toiled on this land for decades could only look at the houses taking shape and dream....

Worse was to come – their water catchment area became polluted. The workers who used to get treated spring water now only got muddy water. There were times when they hardly got any water at all for weeks. In 2013, they were without proper drinking water

for almost three months.

In the face of this massive attack, the workers organised, created barricades and started to stop the lorries. They also put up signboards creating a 100-metre-deep buffer zone which the developers could not enter. As the companies needed to use the Semenyih estate road, they eventually had to meet some of the demands made by the workers' committee. The workers were finally provided with drinking water, which was now pumped from an underwater source.

Meanwhile the committee took the matter to the Selangor state government, which had a policy in place since 1993 that plantation companies must first build houses before proceeding with eviction. But this policy was not often enforced.

Negotiations then started when YB Xavier Jayakumar was the relevant state exco member and continued with the current exco YB V. Ganabathurai.

Initially there were lots of setbacks. Credit should be given to YB Ganabathurai who did not give in to the estate owners' wishes. He always told Sime Darby to resolve the matter with the plantation workers and said that the state government would not agree to eviction of the workers without their housing needs being met. This gave us room to negotiate.

Final agreement

Finally Sime Darby agreed to the housing but it took almost another two years



Establishing buffer zone.

to finally come to the current agreement as there were a couple of major sticking points. We wanted the Sale and Purchase agreement to be signed first and the houses built to be given free. Numerous meetings were held in YB Ganabattirau's office, PSM's Semenyih office, the temple and at the estate. There were tense times when the other party said they would start doing work and asked the workers to be prepared for electricity and water cuts. The workers responded equally angrily by lodging police reports and writing hard-hitting letters to Sime Darby.

The stakes were high. For the plantation workers, we were demanding fair compensation – Sime Darby must repay its workers, not only for the current generation but also the previous generations. On its part, Sime Darby was rushing for time as it had sold the land to a third party and these 17 families were holding up the development. In the end, goodwill and wisdom prevailed. En Hamili Abdul Hamid, the vice President of

Sime Darby Property Bhd., and I shook hands finally because it was a tough one from both ends. Both parties got what they wanted.

We also take this opportunity to thank our lawyer Ragu Kesavan, local councillors Thiaga and Rajen as well as Senator Chandramohan and Datuk Nizam from the Kajang Municipal Council who all helped us at various stages of the struggle.

Grassroots empowerment

Looking back, this victory is due in large part to the organising work done by us for more than 25 years. We used to teach the students in Semenyih Estate in the early 1990s. After that we mobilised them under the Plantation Workers Support Committee to fight for monthly wages for estate workers. This not only empowered the people in this struggle for just compensation but also helped build trust with them. There were occasions when the bosses tried to discourage the estate workers from working with us. They

failed because this trust had been forged over decades and was not something that was sought to be built only during election periods. All meetings are held in a democratic manner with full participation and knowledge of all the workers. Every decision was ultimately theirs. To fight or to surrender was their choice. We were always with them.

The signing of the landmark agreement on Semenyih Estate means the workers will soon have to leave the estate which has been their home for generations. But they will not leave empty-handed; they will soon move to their own new homes.

As for us, we kept the promise we made 30 years ago. In 1987, we took a vow that we would fight alongside the plantation workers. With this settlement, it means we have concluded all the major issues we had been addressing in the plantations in Hulu Langat District. Workers from two other estates, Bangi Estate and Denudin Estate, have similarly signed agreements and are waiting for their free houses to be delivered to them.

Meanwhile the broader struggle between the workers and the capitalists, between the poor and the rich, between the 99% and the 1%, continues. *Berani lawan, berani menang.* Dare to fight, dare to win. The Semenyih Estate 21 can now count themselves among the ranks of workers who fought and won.

S. Arutchelvan is a member of the PSM Central Committee.

Implement the Employment Insurance Scheme now!

M. Sivaranjani

PSM has been lobbying for a Retrenchment Fund for workers for the past 10 years. Malaysia's labour law does provide for retrenchment benefits but this does not cover the 35% of retrenched workers who lose their jobs because their employers go bankrupt or simply abscond. We have witnessed the harrowing times that these unfortunate workers go through. Some of them lose their houses and cars because they can't keep up with mortgage payments. In quite a number of families the education of their children is affected.

This is why we launched a campaign to push the demand for a Retrenchment Fund in 2015 after first holding a roundtable discussion with the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) and interested NGOs to finetune our demands. In the past two years we have organised a "roadshow" throughout Peninsular Malaysia from Perlis to Johor, held meetings with workers, pamphleteered extensively and collected signatures in support of this demand.

On 29 March 2017, a delegation of about 300 workers went to Parliament to



Handing signature cards to YB Richard Riot in Parliament.

hand over more than 30,000 signature cards to the Minister of Human Resources, Dato Richard Riot. The Minister gave an assurance that the majority of our demands had been included in the Employment Insurance Scheme (EIS) that the government is planning to present in Parliament at the forthcoming July session. We have been informed that both the employer and the employee will each be required to contribute 0.25% of the worker's basic pay to a dedicated fund monthly under the management of the Social Security Organisation (Socso), which will then make monthly payments on a reducing scale for six months to every worker who is retrenched – paying 80% of the last drawn salary for the first month, 50% for the second, 40% for the third and

fourth months and 30% for the fifth and sixth months.

The Malaysian Employers' Federation (MEF) has been and is strenuously protesting the EIS. This isn't surprising as employers are generally unhappy with any additional expenditure and they would like to postpone if not cancel the EIS. But what *is* surprising is the series of questions raised by several Pakatan Harapan MPs headed by YB Dr Ong Kian Ming on 28 April 2017. The PH, which has till now not shown much interest in the Retrenchment Fund and has done little to push for it over the past two years, has suddenly discovered numerous issues of public importance related to the EIS!

Our response to the issues raised by the MEF and Dr Ong et al. is as follows:

1. The EIS is meant to

supplement but not replace the existing retrenchment benefits that are mentioned in the Employment Act 1955, which specifies that workers with more than five years of service be given a retrenchment benefit equivalent to 20 days' wages for each year of service. This retrenchment benefit is to be paid by their former employer. As mentioned earlier, about a third of retrenched workers do not get any retrenchment benefits as their employers claim bankruptcy. The EIS will be of great help to this category of workers as they will receive some income for the first six months after being laid off, giving them a little breathing space to look for another job. The remaining two-thirds of retrenched workers would also benefit from the EIS, but their retrenchment benefit paid by their former employers as specified under the Employment Act will be reduced by a sum equal to the EIS benefit they receive.

2. At present only workers with an income below RM2,000 per month are covered by the Employment Act. The EIS is expected to expand coverage to workers with a monthly wage of below RM4,000. This we fully support. Given today's prices, RM4,000 isn't a huge income and most workers earning RM4,000 nowadays would not have put aside enough savings to handle an unexpected job loss. Once the EIS is up and running, we should consider extending it to cover workers whose income places them in



High-5 workers left high and dry after their company went bankrupt.

the M40 (middle 40%) as well, perhaps with a cap on contributions and benefits at the RM4,000 wage level.

3. We do share the PH's concern regarding the costs of managing this scheme. The decision to park this scheme under Socso is a good one as Socso is an established institution with a presence in every district of our country. Administrative costs will be minimised if Socso handles this scheme.

4. The criticism raised by the PH and the MEF that the contributions made to the EIS will not be refunded to workers who were never retrenched is misleading and mischievous. They seem to be implying that these workers are somehow being "shortchanged". Hello, this is not a savings scheme like the EPF but an insurance scheme. Insurance schemes are based on the concept of social solidarity whereby all members of the group contribute so that the unlucky few who suffer an adverse event (in this case, sudden loss of job) have a

"softer landing". There is nothing sinister about it.

The proposed EIS is very much like the Socso system itself. 6.8 million workers contribute to Socso every month. Only 60,000 of them apply annually under its employment injury scheme. The majority – the luckier ones – do not get caught in workplace accidents. If the PH and the MEF want to be consistent, they should lobby for Socso to refund the workers who never made any claims!

5. The MEF proposal that instead of the EIS, a third account be opened under the EPF to which each worker would contribute 1% of his or her income monthly, is a non-starter. A worker would have to contribute to this third account for more than six years in order to accumulate a sum equivalent to one month's wages. How much protection will that give him or her against sudden job loss? That's the beauty of funds based on social solidarity – the workers pool their resources so that everyone is covered.

6. The provision of courses to enhance the skills of retrenched workers is an excellent idea. And here we agree with the PH that sufficient care must be taken to ensure that cronies do not take advantage of their connections to offer bogus skills-enhancement programmes that only drain the resources of the EIS fund but give little useful training. Skills training must be handled by Socso or another government agency and not outsourced to for-profit entities.

7. The MEF states that, based on an average wage of RM2,800 per month, 0.25% from employers and another 0.25% from 6.8 million workers would add up to RM1.142 billion in the EIS fund within a year. According to the MEF, this is too big a sum. Well, if we take the average wage figure quoted by the MEF and calculate the budget required to pay six months' wages according to the reducing scale proposed in the E.I.S. for the 50,000 workers who lose their jobs annually, we get a figure of RM0.38 billion. This does not cover the cost of retraining workers. And let's not forget – in our economy, recessions occur once every 8-10 years. When a recession hits us, the number of laid-off workers will rise dramatically. The EIS must build up its financial reserves to meet these contingencies. So the argument that the EIS will be collecting too much does not hold water.

8. The MEF has argued that forcing all employers to make mandatory monthly

contributions to the EIS to cover the eventuality of companies going bankrupt is not fair to the majority of companies that are prudently run. PSM feels that this argument is shallow – even well-known international firms like Seagate Industries, Rubicon Technology, HGST Technologies, Samsung Electronic Display and Fairchild Semiconductor have laid off workers. Retrenchment can affect any sector of the economy. Poor fiscal management is only one cause of retrenchments. Technological innovation and economic downturns are also important causes.

PSM would like to point out that the proposed EIS is fair to employers. The amount of retrenchment benefits that they have to pay their laid-off workers is reduced by the amount that the EIS pays out. This represents savings for the company.

The MEF should realise that the EIS is also for their benefit. In times of economic downturn, the collapse of aggregate demand threatens the survival of many firms by shrinking their market. Funds like the EIS are one form of the counter-cyclical spending that was advocated by noted economist John Maynard Keynes to keep the economy afloat in recessionary times.

PSM would thus like the MEF to take the longer view and explain to its members the low cost of the EIS to them and the benefits that they would enjoy, namely a lower retrenchment bill should

retrenchment occur and the EIS' impact on boosting aggregate demand when the economy goes into recession.

As for our YBs in Pakatan Harapan, you certainly have a duty to make sure the proposed EIS truly benefits workers and loopholes that allow the seepage of funds to prop up crony companies are closed. But we hope that you will bear in mind that there are far-right groups that practically deify the “free market” and are antagonistic to any attempts by the government to enhance social protection for workers. There are strong forces in our society that would like to delay if not stop the EIS. We hope you will not wittingly or unwittingly play into their hands. Numerous pronouncements by the United Nations' International Labour Organisation (ILO) over the past few decades, in particular ILO Conventions 102 and 168, have supported the idea of a retrenchment fund. We would like the PH to come out with an unequivocal endorsement of the EIS as what is now on the table is a good first step and it should not be delayed any further.

PSM calls on Malaysian workers to call for the immediate implementation of the EIS. This battle can only be considered won when the bill setting up this scheme is approved by Parliament!

M. Sivaranjani heads the Workers' Bureau of PSM.

30 April 2017

The plight of working class women remains unresolved after 100 years

Joint statement in conjunction with International Women's Day 2017

EVERY year, on this day, women are celebrated the world over for the unique role they play in society. However, it is disappointing to reflect that the issues women struggled with a hundred years ago in 1917, when working class women took to the streets demanding for “Bread & Peace” in feudal Russia, remain the same, even though their uprising had led to the downfall of the oppressive Tsar regime and initiated this global annual commemoration for women.

The struggle for “bread and butter” is still an issue because working class women and single mothers are unable to meet their family needs due to low wages and rising cost of living.

On this day, brave women in our community who have stepped up to uphold the rights of women and the downtrodden are showcased as exemplary figures while we take stock of progress made in our struggle for equality in a burgeoning global community.

Thus, we are enraged that the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development has suffered a hefty cut in its allocation in the 2017 Federal



Malaysian women construction workers.

Budget which totals some RM260 billion. The drop from RM1.87 billion in 2016 to RM1.75 billion this year is indicative of the government's view that the RM120 million thus “saved” can be put to a better use than assisting urban poor, working class women, single mothers, their school going children and other vulnerable groups who require the protection of the Welfare Department.

According to statistics provided by the ministry, 61,600 single mothers were recipients of a total of RM151 million in 2014. However, in response to a parliamentary question, the ministry reported that 830,000 single mothers

were recorded in the country. Even if only 40% of the latter figure should fall under the low-income bracket, it appears that the Welfare Department turned away at least 270,400 low income single mother applicants in 2014!

An urgent revision of its priorities is urged of the government and this must be reflected in a boost to the meagre allocation that this ministry has received. Only that will indicate that the Government is truly committed to the “well-being of the Rakyat”.

Low income single mothers are hit the hardest because there is no change in the Welfare Department's

operating procedure that specifies that only those families with a monthly household income of RM750 or less are can be considered for financial aid from the Welfare Department. This welfare benefit cap is cruel and results in the turning away of many low-income single mother families which are struggling to cope with a monthly income of between RM750 and RM1,500. The RM750 eligibility ceiling should be increased to RM1,500 to reflect the current costs of basic necessities.

We also call for a proactive revision on the classification of the term “single mothers” eligible for welfare aid, to include women with children below the age of 18 years whose husbands are inmates in prisons and rehabilitation centres. Having lost their entire household income through no fault of theirs, many women and children are displaced with potential risk to their health, education and well-being.

We can foresee that the government will celebrate International Women’s Day with activities that highlight the achievements of prominent women leaders in business and in society to prove that the government has been discharging its role in implementing initiatives that have successfully upgraded women.

These “showcasing” activities are grand farcical attempts that mask the real sufferings of working class women whose lives will further deteriorate following the

budget cut.

In 1975, March 8 was adopted as International Women’s Day, yet Malaysia has made little progress in moving away from a patriarchal system that does little to reduce gender disparities, defend the rights of or alleviate women from discrimination and violence.

We, the undersigned, call upon the Malaysian government to:

1. Increase the budget allocated to the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development for 2017, by doubling the 2016 allocation as this ministry is responsible for the improvement of the lives of people who are the foundation of the nation – the working class.
2. Raise the Poverty Line Income Measurement to RM1,500 and set up a system that monitors the progress of families below this threshold.
3. Set up government funded crèches at all low cost residential areas to provide a safe and secure environment for children of the working class. Children from low cost homes should automatically be registered in quality crèches.
4. Revise the classification of the term “single mothers” eligible for welfare aid, to include women with children below the age of 18 years whose husbands are inmates in prisons.

5. Introduce a new low rate for low cost homes especially for low income single mothers with an easy payment hire-purchase scheme.
6. Revisit single-mother applications that were rejected by the Welfare Department and introduce a new scheme that will allow for the department to analyse problems and issues faced by single mothers, and implement new schemes to elevate their standard of living.

The Jaringan Rakan Ibu Tunggal has engaged with the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development from 2014 through memoranda and dialogues. However, none of our recommendations have been implemented as of yet. We reiterate the seriousness of challenges being faced by low income single mothers, the most vulnerable of working class women.

The above joint statement issued in conjunction with International Women’s Day 2017 was endorsed by the following organisations: Aliran; Community Development Centre, Kajang (CDC); Inter-Research And Studies (IRAS); Jaringan Rakyat Tertindas (JERIT); Monitoring Sustainability of Globalisation (MSN); National Union of Flight Attendants Malaysia (Nufam); PACOS trust; Parti Sosialis Malaysia; Persatuan Wanita Selangor; Projek Dialog; Saya Anak Bangsa Malaysia (SABM); Women’s Centre for Change (Penang)

Why do we keep punishing the victims?

Veronica Anne Retnam

THE recent news about a home-alone toddler in Air Kuning near Tampin highlights a flaw in the government welfare services. According to newspaper reports, the single mother concerned had left her toddler at home with children of primary school age as she wanted to visit her mentally ill mother who had been admitted to hospital. However, when the authorities came by, the two older children ran out of the house as they were scared, leaving the toddler alone. This has resulted in the single mother being charged for neglect of the child.

There are many families where children are left to fend for themselves. There are simply insufficient childcare centres for pre-school children from B40 households – the bottom 40% of Malaysian households. Are we going to punish the thousands of single mothers who leave their toddlers at home in the charge of other children, often under 12 themselves, if they are not able to bring their children to the workplace?

The law cannot punish these mothers. Isn't it the moral duty of the government in power to provide for the basic



needs of the poorest families? Is it wrong for a daughter to visit her mentally ill mother? We need to ask why the mother could not leave the child in a safer place. Was there a childcare centre nearby? Was it affordable for her? One cannot moralise and avoid confronting the fact that we are not very considerate to the poorest families in our midst.

Jaringan Rakan Ibu Tunggal has requested that the government provide subsidised childcare services in lower-income neighbourhoods. In our meetings with the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development in 2015 and again in 2016, we suggested that single-mother

households with monthly incomes below RM1,500 should be given vouchers for childcare services. This has yet to be done, and in our country that is pushing to attain developed status, thousands of single-mother families are being left by the wayside.

Is arresting the mother a long-term solution? Who is responsible for ensuring safety when a single mother cannot afford childcare? Honourable Ministers, please go to the ground to see not how many mothers can be arrested but how many mothers need help in terms of childcare.

We have brought this urgent need to your attention but you have chosen to ignore our proposal. Why does this government keep punishing the poor over and over again? Act positively. Stop using the Child Care Act to criminalise poor mothers. Release the toddler's mother, return her child to her but please make subsidised childcare services available immediately.

Veronica Anne Retnam is Coordinator of Jaringan Rakan Ibu Tunggal.

10 January 2017

Fighting homophobia and sexism under global capitalism

Rachel Evans

WHAT is the LGBTQIA community? Lesbians are women who love women, gay men are men who love men, bisexuals are men and women who love both sexes, transgender people are those who need to transition to the opposite sex from what they are assigned at birth. Research has also found that between 0.05% and 1.7% of the global population – 1 in 2,000 people – are born with intersex traits – biological sex characteristics that don't conform to typical notions of male or female. The upper estimation is around the same as the number of red-haired people, yet intersex people are far less visible. Queer is an umbrella term to include a range of people questioning their sexuality and working out where they fit on the spectrum of sexual rights. "A" stands for asexual – those in the community who don't feel sexually attracted to others.

It is estimated that around 1 in 10 people identify with the queer community. The rate of women identifying as same-sex-attracted has risen in the last six years, as the marriage equality campaign has gained strength across the world.

Queers are oppressed by the sexist, homophobic family unit and by the capitalist state



Tanay Mojumdar, LGBT activist.

and its institutions. Family rejection, bullying in schools, high suicide rates, discriminatory age-of-consent laws, laws against gay male sex, being beaten on the streets, lack of housing, being sacked in the workplace, not being able to marry or adopt, inability to access reproductive technology – these are all issues queers face. In June 2016, in a brutal homophobic hate crime, 49 queers were murdered in the Pulse nightclub in Orlando in the US. In April the same year, two Bangladeshi gay rights activists Xulhaz Mannan and Tanay Mojumdar were murdered.

Queer oppression is linked to women's oppression. Class societies need to institutionalise rigid gender binaries and regulate sexual and gender expression for the

ruling class to pass on their wealth to their children. Women and queer oppression did not exist in pre-class society. The development of class society – around 15,000 years ago – resulted in what Friedrich Engels describes as the "historic defeat of the female sex". The Marxist analysis of how women's oppression developed lays out the road to women's and queer liberation.

A materialist analysis, laid out in books such as Engels's *Family, Private Property and the State*, demonstrates that the roots of women's oppression lie in the main institutions of class society – private property, the family and the state – rather than in the realm of the natural or biological. Private property, the family and the state were institutionalised by the new ruling class, and through these institutions women's oppression and sex and gender oppression were consolidated and enforced through laws and societal pressure.

It's important to note that *Homo sapiens* emerged 200,000 years ago, and class society, women's and queer oppression have existed for only a small fraction of human history. Pre-class societies were

women-led and matriarchal, and there is evidence of same-sex loving couples and varied genders – two-spirits etc.

Women's reproductive role in a class society was vital for the male, patriarchal ruling class to control. The need to determine progeny – who your child was – was key to passing on the wealth stolen by the new elite class from the collective. In the first class-divided modes of production – slavery, feudalism, the Asiatic mode of production – women were the subordinate sex, slaving within the home to perform domestic duties and child-rearing. Men led the public life, were involved in monetary exchange, and were the rulers, priests and lawmakers. Indeed the origins of the word “family” are derived from *famulus* or slave. Land and goods, formerly collectively owned under primitive communism or pre-class society, were stolen by ruling-class men who needed to pass on property and wealth to their heirs. Enforced monogamy of women to ruling-class men was key to this property exchange.

Given that women and queers are oppressed by class, the family unit and the state, our liberation is bound up in the eradication of capitalism. The socialist revolution aims to socialise women's role in the family unit. Currently women within the family unit are away from public production or subordinate within it because of the role they play in raising the next generation of workers.

Rigid gender binaries



Friedrich Engels.

were and are enforced by ideological and legal means. Women's ‘traditional’ and ‘natural’ role is in the family home raising children because, argues the sexist trope, they are more nurturing. Sexual and loving relations outside this framework – queer love – were criminalised and continue to be criminalised today in 72 countries.

Capitalism has nevertheless created the conditions for the sexual and gender liberation movements. The peasant class was forced off their commons and into cities, and wars brought men together and women out of the private sphere – the home – and into social production at an unprecedented scale. Throwing the sexes together created the material conditions for a burgeoning of same-sex love and relations. The most decisive of the capitalist revolutions, the French Revolution of 1789, established the Napoleonic Code which decriminalised homosexuality. The new

capitalist class saw its role as righting the wrongs of feudal backwardness. Compared with life in regional and rural areas, cities became a melting pot of sexual expression. Queer life flourished in Germany; in 1920 in Berlin there were 60 places for lesbians to meet.

The movement in Germany in the late 1800s led the international sexual rights movement and influenced the Russian revolutionaries, the Bolsheviks. In 1864 a gay man in Germany, Karl Ulrich, began writing in defence of homosexuality. Ulrich was joined by sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, who was an outspoken advocate for sexual minorities and founded the Scientific Humanitarian Committee. This committee carried out “the first advocacy for homosexual and transgender rights”. The Bolsheviks met with the committee and were influenced by its work.

The Russian Revolution was the most significant advance for queers and women in the 20th century, and its lessons still resonate today. The new, Marxist-led government in the liberated Soviet Union granted women complete equality under the law. Abortion was made free and legal at any stage in pregnancy, and laws giving the foetus human rights were abolished. Gender discrimination in hiring and firing workers was forbidden, prostitution was decriminalised and the criminal code of 1922 declared “the absolute non-interference of the state and society into sexual

matters, so long as nobody is injured, and no one's interests are encroached upon". The Bolsheviks legalised same-sex marriage and there is evidence transgender operations were conducted.

However, like the idea that women can be liberated within the framework of capitalism, the idea that the socialist revolution will in itself liberate women is misguided. For gender inequality to be abolished, not only must women be brought fully into social production but private domestic labour must be replaced with socialised services, and there must be a thoroughgoing, conscious struggle against the bourgeois culture and social psychology of sexism and homophobia.

The Russian Revolution aimed to socialise the private domestic sphere through public food halls, laundromats, free childcare and a groundbreaking Family Code on Marriage. It recognised only civil marriage and allowed divorce at the simple request of either partner. De facto relationships were given legal equality. It separated property ownership and inheritance from marriage.

The code abolished illegitimacy and endeavoured to make familial relations independent of the marriage contract. The code stipulated financial support for all children when their parents separated, and women with children won significant payments through the courts. Where individual paternity could not be established, often



Kurdish women fighters.

all the men named by the women as possible fathers were ordered to pay support.

But the invasion of 14 imperialist armies opposed to the Russian Revolution, leading to the Stalinist counter-revolution, meant the women's and queer liberation programme was thwarted. The revolution betrayed, the Stalinists exalted the nuclear family and recriminalised abortion and homosexuality. Homosexuality was declared a "Western decadence", and in January 1934 police conducted mass arrests of gay men. The rise of fascism and Stalinism were a momentous setback for queer and women's liberation and the class struggle. They destroyed the queer movement for a whole generation. It wasn't until the anti-colonial struggles of the 1960s and 1970s that the working-class movements began to recover momentum.

The Cuban Revolution of

1959 invigorated revolutionary forces internationally. Women were at the forefront of the revolution, but due to Catholicism's reach and Stalinism's homophobic influence, the Cuban leadership did not repeal anti-homophobia laws until 1979. The government also incarcerated homosexuals in Military Units to Aid Production (UMAPs) – forced labour camps. UMAPs were closed down after protests led by the Cuban federation of writers and artists. When Cuba repealed the discriminatory age-of-consent laws in 1993, Fidel Castro apologised to the queer community, saying "I don't consider homosexuality to be a phenomenon of degeneration ... I am absolutely opposed to any form of repression, contempt, scorn or discrimination with regard to homosexuality."

Women in the Cuban Revolution however won near-full equality before the law –

pay equity, childcare, abortion and military service. The prostitution trade was broken. In the 1970s the Family Code debated and drafted by the Federation of Cuban Women was implemented and stipulated that men do half the housework.

Today Cuba is leading the world in transrights, with free transgender operations; debating the possibility of marriage equality; and hosting rallies and film festivals and broadcasting community service announcements on state TV about how homophobia, not homosexuality, is a “social disease”.

In the US, the queer rights movement was reinvigorated with the 1969 Stonewall riot. Queers, their love criminalised, rose up in a New York pub against the extortion and harassment of local police. Organisations like Stonewall, Gay Liberation Front, Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries and the Gay Activist Alliance were formed. Removing laws that criminalised gays, lesbians and transgenders, ending all discriminatory laws, rights to work and housing, and safety at bars became the rallying cries.

In Australia, our Stonewall was in June 1978 when police brutally assaulted a pride parade of 1,500 people, arresting 53, beating them in police cells and outing them to family members and workplaces.

The second wave of feminism – following on from the first wave, the suffragettes’



The Stonewall riot, 1969.

movement – profoundly changed working-class consciousness and improved women’s lives in the Global North. Many parts of the Bolsheviks’ original platform became core demands of the feminist movement in the imperialist countries. The second wave demanded abortion on demand, free 24-hour childcare, equal pay and educational opportunities, affirmative action in the workplace and fully paid maternity leave. The capitalist class however worked hard to co-opt the leadership of the movement with democratic rights, legal reforms and funding and positions in the bureaucracy.

The neoliberal offensive enacted in the 1980s by the ruling class fragmented, pulverised and co-opted movements, unions and community groups. It led an ideological attack on class politics through postmodernism, then liberal feminism and

identity politics. The class-struggle feminist segment of the movement was weakened, and the feminist movements declined. The rainbow rights battles, focused in the 1980s against HIV/AIDS, also declined in the 1990s but resurged in the 2000s around the fight for marriage equality.

In Australia, women’s rights mobilisations in the recent period have been largest in responding to the rape and murder of journalist Jill Meagher and the plight of domestic violence victims. Deep-seated sexism has resulted in one woman being murdered every week in Australia by a partner or former partner.

Liberal feminism argues that women don’t need liberation, they just need to work in the system to get a good deal for themselves. This tenet in the feminist consciousness assisted Julia Gillard of the Australian Labor Party to become Prime Minister

in 2012. On the same day she correctly called out the misogyny of the opposition leader Tony Abbott, she cut 12,000 single parents – mostly women – off a higher-paying welfare payment. Liberal feminists, like Margaret Thatcher, Hillary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice, implement the needs of the capitalists while using feminist consciousness to dull resistance to their neoliberal attacks.

However, socialists need to work in a united front with more middle-class and liberal elements in the queer and women's rights movements. These elements will never be the motor force of the movements, but socialists need to build the broadest movements to win concessions from the capitalist class.

The marriage equality movement, supported and assisted by socialists, is the important fight for formal legal equality for same-sex loving couples. Strong rainbow rights movements have won this in 20 countries, including three in the Global South – Brazil, Uruguay and Mexico. Like in the case of equality of voting rights and equal pay for women, capitalist rule has not been shaken by marriage equality. But the advance of these civil rights is crucial for socialists to support – the rainbow community will not identify with socialists unless we stand up for this marginalised sector.

A total of 72 countries have criminal laws against sexual activity by LGBTIs.

Executions occur in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and in ISIS-held territory. The following countries have prescribed the death penalty for LGBT activities but executions have not been carried out: Sudan, Yemen, Nigeria, Somalia, Afghanistan, Mauritania, Pakistan and Qatar.

Venezuela's revolution, led by Hugo Chavez and the Chavismo movement, challenged capitalism and launched the "pink tide" movement in Latin America. Venezuela's constitution is the first in the Global South (and possibly the world) to recognise women's housework as a legitimate economic activity producing wealth and contributing to the social welfare of the population: "The State will recognise household chores as an economic activity that creates added value, produces wealth and social welfare. Housewives have the right to social security according to the law" (Article 88).

In March 2007, the right of women to live a life free of violence became an organic law enacted by the National Assembly. Now the law must be effectively implemented. This includes setting up special courts or legal units to handle cases of violence against women across the country, with some 19 courts already set up, covering all regions. These courts were described as "new institutions of the Venezuelan state to eradicate violence against women". These courts have the authority to tem-

porarily arrest perpetrators of violence against women and prohibit them from leaving the country. The first dates for the trial should be set 10 to 20 days after the act of violence, with sentencing on the same day with penalties and fines. Appeals processes exist.

This requires mobilising women to become "a real force, a deterrent force, an army to combat violence against women and to change the notion of women as battered victims and weak human beings". Some 25,000 "points of encounter" for women are being set up where women have easy access to information and services without cumbersome requirements and bureaucratic regulations. These "points of encounter" will consist of at least 10 women, who will then organise more women to create "an army to combat violence against women ... the point is not only to decrease violence against women, but to eradicate it".

Elsewhere in Latin America, since 2005, the Bolivian cultural, democratic, indigenous-led revolution has introduced legislative changes and increased social and political participation among the female population, including the Law against Political Violence and Harassment against Women.

This provides a two- to five-year prison sentence for anyone who persecutes, harasses or threatens an elected woman or women exercising public functions. Bolivia has also implemented anti-

patriarchal land reform – the number of Bolivian women with access to their own land increased to 46% between 1996 and 2016.

On queer rights, transgender operations are free in Bolivia, and trans people don't need operations to change their sex ID. The right to sexual freedom is written in the constitution. However, homophobia is still prevalent, and there is not much organising for queer rights outside very small groups.

In the Middle East, the anti-capitalist Rojavan revolution, led by the Kurdish Worker's Party, was aided by the weakness of the Assad regime in Syria, and three autonomous cantons were declared in July 2012 on the principles of democratic federalism. This is a social revolution that emphasises social and economic equality, ecology, religious tolerance, ethnic inclusion and collectivity combined with individual freedom and feminism.

The women-only Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and the People's Protection Units (YPG) have successfully fought off the barbaric ISIS who enslave and rape women. An estimated 35% of their fighters – around 15,000 – are women. Local communes and larger people's councils make decisions, with men and women co-presidents. Women's councils operate in parallel and have veto power over the people's councils. Female representation is

guaranteed on all the people's councils. No gender is allowed more than 60% representation.

The Rojavan revolution, surviving under incredible odds with women at the forefront, is an inspiration to feminist anti-capitalists across the world, and socialists need to provide as much active solidarity as we can.

There can be no women's liberation or queer liberation without a revolution that dismantles the institutions that keep women and queers oppressed – the family unit, the capitalist state, private property.

To reach a point where the political elite have no credibility in the eyes of the mass of people and power can be wrested from the oligarchs, socialist parties need to deepen our reach into workplaces, universities and communities with a feminist, anti-homophobia politics. Socialist parties will not be taken seriously by these communities, by women suffering under patriarchal traditions, if we do not.

Internationally there is a resurgence of the right wing. Trump's election, the rise of the far-right Pauline Hanson in Australia, the popularity of Le Pen in France and the right-wing parliamentary coup in Brazil point to challenging times for socialist, feminist, queer and anti-racist forces. However, the people's power movements are rising in the US, and Bernie Sanders's democratic socialist message still has a lot of support. The Latin American pink tide and

the Rojavan revolution are being challenged but are holding and, in the case of Rojava, winning ground from ISIS. We need to offer as much solidarity as we can with these heroic anti-capitalist frontiers and continue to build socialist parties that empower women and the LGBTQIA community and lay systematic waste to backward traditional gender ideas.

I will finish off with a quote from Bolivian Vice-President Alvaro Garcia Linera on the ebbing Latin American pink tide: "We are in for hard times, but hard times are oxygen for revolutionaries. Are we not coming from down below, are we not the ones who have been persecuted, tortured, marginalised in neoliberal times? The golden decade of the continent has not come free. It has been your struggle, from below, from the unions, the universities, the neighbourhoods, that has led to a revolutionary cycle. The first wave did not fall from the sky. We bear in our bodies the marks and wounds of the struggles of the 80s and 90s. And if today, provisionally, temporarily, we must go back to the struggles of the 80s, 90s, 2000s, let us welcome them. That is what a revolutionary is for."

Rachel Evans is with the Socialist Alliance in Australia. The above is excerpted from a paper presented at the Socialism 2016 conference held in Kuala Lumpur on 25-27 November 2016.

Another blueprint for Indians in Malaysia

K. Arumugam

INDIAN Malaysians have been blessed with a surfeit of blueprints of various shades since Merdeka. The Malaysian Indian Blueprint (MIB), which was launched by our Prime Minister on 23 April 2017, is the latest of these. However well-intentioned it might be, the MIB is grossly inadequate as it fails to contend with several of the underlying realities besetting the Indian poor.

Malaysia is the third richest in South-East Asia in terms of its per capita gross domestic product (GDP). It has been recording impressive performances over the last few decades. Data from the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) shows that the gross national income per capita has been increasing and it amounted to RM37,930 in 2016. This figure looks quite good on paper but in reality things are not so rosy. The average monthly household income of the bottom 40% (B40) of the Malaysian population is only RM2,743.

Even the massive affirmative action policies engineered by the government since 1971 to positively discriminate in favour of the Bumiputra poor failed to



Launch of Blueprint.

improve the income levels of the bottom 40% of the Bumiputra community. Instead, these policies have benefitted the rich who have increased their wealth disproportionately.

Information made available in the MIB documents indicates that in Malaysia's bottom 40%, the Bumiputras make up 73.6%, with an average monthly household income of RM2,367, though the Bumiputra community makes up only some 65% of the overall Malaysian population. The New Economic Policy (NEP) implemented with full vigour over the past 45 years has clearly failed to improve the household income levels of the poorest Bumiputras.

According to the same documents, Indian Malaysians make up 8.5% of the B40 group, with an average monthly household income of RM2,672.

The divide between the rich and the poor is getting ever wider, with wealth being increasingly concentrated within the elite stratum comprising both Bumiputras and non-Bumiputras that is inextricably fused to political power. This elite stratum has a huge capacity to influence the decision-making processes of government institutions so as to create extractive policies that benefit the elite and the rent seekers.

This is evident from the Crony Capitalism Index



constructed by *The Economist* magazine, which measures billionaires' wealth in relation to the nation's GDP. In 2016, Malaysia ranked second, behind only Russia. Almost all the billionaires are/were cronies of the ruling political party. It is no accident that those in control of political power have created a system that distributes the wealth of the nation in a manner that is skewed and totally detrimental to the poor.

The MIB bereft of political will and government policies specifically designed to implement it is certainly not an NEP for the Indian bottom 40% (IB40). Even if it were, without putting in place structural reform for equitable distribution of wealth, there will be no light at the end of the tunnel for not only the IB40 but for any households in the bottom 40% irrespective of their ethnicities. But to the deeply entrenched political system, any form of structural reform or any change that rocks the boat is anathema.

Nonetheless, the MIB

does officially acknowledge the longstanding core issues faced by Indian Malaysians. The Indians, numbering about 2 million, constitute about 7% of the Malaysian population. In terms of electoral votes, they are still considered vital in a number of mixed parliamentary and state constituencies. The MIB, for all intents and purposes, is nothing more than a condescending document to woo the Indian votes for the 14th general election. The remedies outlined to tackle the core issues of the Indian poor can be likened to receiving treatment for serious chronic diseases at a government outpatient clinic, albeit now with the MIB there is a special queue for the Indians.

The MIB's introductory narrative is commendable as it concisely dissects the Indian Malaysian reality. The document recognises the presence of Indians in the Malay Peninsula in the 2nd century BC, in the 4th century AD and the Indian trade merchants in the 15th century AD. It also acknowledges the Indians'

contribution to the economy as immense and the cultural richness of the Indian community.

In defining the context for the MIB, the narration is pretty accurate. The target is the Indian poor. The report confirms that they have been poor since 1966, noting that 66.7% of Indian labour was in plantations and another 2.6% in the mining sector. Factors like crop conversion, change of ownership of the plantation companies, cheap deployment of foreign labour and development and industrialisation pushed this labour class out of the plantations and into urban slums to become the present-day Indian underclass in the bottom 40%, the IB40.

It is important to note that the NEP, introduced in 1971 with the two-pronged strategy of eradicating poverty among all Malaysians as well as reducing and subsequently eliminating identification of race by economic function and geographical location, ignored the Indian poor.

It is not to be denied that the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) had cried out in almost all its delegates' meetings and conventions over the plight of the Indians. There were indeed many occasions of handouts, concessions, scholarships, admission to universities and the like that benefitted mainly the middle- and upper-class Indians. Contextually, the MIB brings the wheel back to the starting point, signalling that nothing has changed significantly for the Indian poor.

Who are the IB40?

The IB40 are the same since 1966. Devoid of any policy framework for structural reform, they have inherited poverty and have become the urban underclass. In terms of numbers, they comprise 227,600 households. Their average monthly household income is RM2,672 and 82% of the IB40 are deep in debt. The MIB also noted that 3,500 households are classified as poor with a monthly income less than the Poverty Line Income (PLI) of RM960 (RM910 for rural), and another 22,700 households have a monthly household income less than RM1,000.

According to the MIB, based on a 2010 survey, only 3% of the IB40 owned houses. This indicates that the remaining 97% are either living in slums, squatters or staying in rented homes. In terms of distribution, 89% of the IB40 live in an urban setting and the balance in rural areas. On access to education, 45% have no access to preschool education, only 54% pass UPSR and 44% pass SPM. Among children who drop out at primary level, 13% are Indian.

The Indians are under-employed and the unemployment rate is the highest, 4% for Indian males and 5.2% for Indian females, whilst the national average is 2.9% and 3.2% respectively. On crime, the MIB states that 70% of gang members are Indians and Indians are over-represented in violent crimes at 31%.



Only 3% of Indians in the B40 own a house.

Remedies

Remedies have to be serious. The analysis of inequality by focusing on income is a grossly misleading approach. Over and above income, the top 20% (T20) and middle 40% (M40) are also backed by assets in the form of property, investments and savings, which are not captured in the income data. The IB40 group is not backed by any wealth and is trapped in poverty with low wages. The government's cheap-labour policy has effectively closed the doors for the B40 to better their wages. The present minimum wage rates of RM1,000 for Peninsular Malaysia and RM920 for East Malaysia are far too low.

Without structural reform of the economy, there will be no improvement in income levels and the core issues of poverty can never be solved. Therefore, the MIB's programme-based intervention will only partially address the symptoms of poverty and not the underlying root causes. For example, just to empower the

IB40's 227,600 households with an improvement of its disposable income level by RM1,000 a month, a redistribution of RM2.73 billion is required annually. Allocations such as RM500 million in the MIB as a seed fund to improve savings among the IB40 make very little sense in terms of purpose and expected impact.

The MIB's encompassing structure, with a Cabinet Committee for the Indian Community, a Special Indian Task Force, the Pelan Tindakan Sekolah Tamil, SEDIC, SEED and Public-Private Partnerships, is rather interesting. A whole spectrum of interested Indian groups have been roped in to oversee and implement the MIB. It is a brilliant move on the part of Najib to shore up his standing in the Indian Malaysian community. For what it's worth, though, the MIB is merely a sweetener to entice the Indian community with yet another false hope.

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Food insecurity in Malaysia

V. Banoo

*“The measure of strength of a country is not how much weapons it has but how much food we have and our ability to produce our own food.” – Datuk Seri Ahmad Shabery Cheek, Minister of Agriculture and Agro-based Industry, quoted in the *Sunday Star*, 24 July 2016*

IS this empty rhetoric coming from one of the ministers in the Barisan Nasional government or an honest admission of the crucial role played by food production in ensuring the well-being of a nation? Irrespective of the answer, it is undeniable that food, as the most basic of our needs, requires the serious and wholehearted attention of both the government and the people to ensure the country produces enough food at affordable prices all the time. In other words, the government must ensure that we enjoy food security in the true sense of the term.

In this context, it is relevant and also timely that we examine the degree to which Malaysia has achieved self-sufficiency in food production.



Padi cultivation in Malaysia.

Even a cursory examination of the data available clearly shows that after 60 years of independence and 10 Five-Year Plans, we are still far from achieving self-sufficiency. As a matter of fact, since 1990 we have become increasingly dependent on other countries to fulfil our food needs (see table).

It is a fact that during the first three decades after independence we produced more food and imported less. However, beginning from 1990 we have seen worrying increases in the amount of money spent on importing food.

It is clear from the table

on the next page that over a period of 25 years (1990-2015), Malaysia has become frighteningly dependent on the outside world to meet our people's most basic need, that is, our need for food. Our daily food import expenditure of RM12.72 million in 1990 shot up to RM126 million in 2015, an almost tenfold increase. This is obviously an unreasonably sharp increase for a country that was basically an agricultural economy not so very long ago.

The food items imported include vegetables, fruits, fish, meat and processed food. Even rice, which is our staple, is

Malaysian food imports			
Year	Expenditure per year (RM)	Expenditure per month (RM)	Expenditure per day (RM)
1990	4,581.80 million	381.81 million	12.72 million
1996	9,056.20 million	754.68 million	25.15 million
2000	13 billion	1.08 billion	36 million
2005	22 billion	1.83 billion	61 million
2010	30.19 billion	2.51 billion	83 million
2015	45.39 billion	3.78 billion	126 million

Source: Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-based Industry

imported. The country spent about RM24.4 billion importing vegetables over a 10-year period (2005-15). A substantial amount of money is also routinely spent on importing fruits, sugar, honey, processed sugar products as well as other processed food. It is significant to note that fruits, nuts, vegetables, meat, fruit preparations and other processed food were the fastest-growing imports in 2015. Let us also not forget that the import of corn and other animal feed constitutes another major portion of our food import bill. Corn, for instance, is the most important raw ingredient in the preparation of animal feed. According to the Minister of Agriculture, the country is currently importing four million tons of corn worth RM3.1 billion per year (*Sunday Star*, 24 July 2016). The Minister has said that feed grain is one of the biggest contributors to Malaysia's agro-food trade deficit. Poultry, eggs and pork are the only food items that we do not import.

The most important reason for Malaysia becoming very highly dependent on the

outside world to fulfil our food needs is the decline in importance of the agricultural sector, particularly the food sector, in our country's economy. During the first two decades after independence, Malaysia enjoyed a reasonable degree of self-sufficiency and food security. However, macroeconomic policies which favoured industrialisation and urbanisation after 1975 have had very negative effects on agriculture, particularly food production. For example, Malaysia's self-sufficiency in rice dropped from 71% in 1970 to 62% in 2007. Land used for food production declined from 31.5% in 1960 to 16.3% in 2005. The budget allocation for agriculture, which was 23.1% in the Second Malaysia Plan, was reduced to 8.2% in the Seventh Malaysia Plan. The number of people employed in the agricultural sector fell from 35.7% of the workforce to only about 17% by the year 2000. The Seventh Malaysia Plan also witnessed the slow growth of the food sector. At the same time the contribution of agriculture to the country's gross domestic product (GDP)

declined from 30% in the 1970s to 7% in 2013.

As a result of the country's failure to ensure food sufficiency, we have become very dependent on food imports. The constant and somewhat consistent increase in our food import bill means that the people, especially those in the lower-income category, face uncertainty in trying to secure their food supplies. They have to bear the heavy burden of being exposed to high food prices in the world market. In fact, Second Finance Minister Datuk Johari Abdul Ghani has acknowledged that the "escalating cost of food" burdens those from the lower-income groups, who will continue to suffer hardship (*The Sun*, 2 August 2016).

Apart from high food prices, our people will also have to contend with the high degree of unpredictability as to the quantity and quality of food imported. This is because of climatic, political and other external factors beyond our control. For example, we are all well aware of the crop failures in Africa, parts of Asia and in other parts of the world



As the ringgit continues to slide, prices of vegetables and fruits are going up.

resulting from climatic conditions such as climate change. Besides that, the ongoing wars and political turmoil in the Middle East and in other regions can severely affect our access to food from the outside world. The increase in transportation and other costs will only add to the uncertainty surrounding the people's ability to obtain food.

In addition, the acute financial situation faced by the people, especially those from the lower-income group, further undermines their ability to secure food. The declining value of the ringgit against other currencies and the consequent drop in the purchasing power of the people places them in an unenviable position. The fact that Malaysians spend about 31.2% of their disposable income on food on average (Malaysiakini, 1 August 2016) is clear proof of how expensive food is in the country. This represents quite a substantial increase over the 20.6% of disposable income

which people spent on food in 2014 – a rise of more than 50% over a two-year period.

While many developing countries are trying very hard to ensure food self-sufficiency and food security for their citizens, we have not heard anything from the Umno-led government in Malaysia about how they are going to alleviate this important problem faced by the people. What are the government's long-term plans to realise its vociferously declared aim of achieving "food sufficiency and food security"? And what about the Minister of Agriculture and Agro-based Industry's talk of food sovereignty"? Will that be realised as well?

At the moment, the people are not aware of any concrete long-term plans of the Barisan Nasional administration to realise the objective of achieving food sufficiency and food security. Neither is there any mention of a time frame for attaining this goal. Little further has been said about their big

plans to introduce a "Huge Impact Agricultural Policy" and the development of an "Integrated Agricultural Development Authority" to carry out big-time food production in Pekan, Rompin, Batang Lupar and Kota Belud to increase our food supplies.

What we do know is that in the 2017 budget, RM1.2 billion has been allocated for paddy cultivation and about RM1.48 billion for the increased cultivation and export of plantation crops such as oil palm, rubber, cocoa and pepper. However, not a sen of the RM260.8 billion budget has been set aside for the cultivation and development of food crops such as vegetables, fruits, meat and so on.

To add insult to injury, the Umno-led Perak state government resorted last year to evicting small farmers engaged in the cultivation of vegetables and fruits as well those engaged in the breeding of fish, ducks and chickens. Market gardeners in Tronoh, Malim Nawar, Kampar, Sungai Siput and Ipoh who had been working on their lands for more than 40 years were asked to vacate the lands to make way for "development" by developers working in league with the state government's investment holding arm MB Incorporated. Is this how we treat small farmers who have been working hard to meet our basic need for food? So much for the oft-repeated slogan of "People First and Performance



Vegetable farmers sitting in at SUK Office in Ipoh, 5 August 2015.

Now”!

When are we going to realise that empty sloganeering will not solve the problems faced by the people? It is therefore for the people to evaluate the attitude and sincerity of the government in resolving serious problems faced by the ordinary rakyat. It is undeniable that the government’s policies and actions with regard to agriculture over the last few decades have been largely for the benefit of the large plantation owners and the big businessmen.

For the marginalised and the poor, the short-sighted policies of the government, together with the removal of food subsidies and the introduction of GST, plus the steep increase in food prices over the last two years have only served to increase their vulnerability in these trying times. Their real income has declined considerably and this has severely affected their ability to purchase food and other necessities at reasonable prices.

The continuing dependence on foreign countries to

fulfil our food needs will threaten national security in the long term. The government has to embark on a serious and intelligent plan towards achieving self-sufficiency and food security. We must have a Food First policy. The government must take the lead and be directly involved in the efforts to increase our food supply. There seems to be no conceivable reason why Malaysia, which has been producing its own food for decades, cannot do so now. We are blessed with a suitable climate and fertile soil, and our farmers have the know-how and the skills to produce food.

We must begin by encouraging more people to be involved in the business of producing food. Private entrepreneurs, people’s cooperatives and individuals should be given the relevant incentives such as land, credit, seeds, tax exemption and training to be meaningfully involved in this noble enterprise. The government should set aside land for this purpose, either free or at a nominal rent. It should also make available the use of idle agricultural land for growing

food crops. It should immediately stop the practice of evicting food farmers from their land. It should instead recognise their rights to the land by either selling or leasing it for the purpose of producing food crops and meat. It is also very important

that a reasonable minimum guaranteed price be set for their crops or a subsidised cost be calculated to encourage the farmers to continue producing food for the local market.

There are substantial rewards to be reaped when we embark on the road to attain food self-sufficiency. We will be able to stem the outflow of money from our shores. The money saved can be used to further improve and expand our food production besides enhancing our techniques of farming, such as crop rotation, soil protection, pest control etc. Food production will also have the multiplier effect of further encouraging research and development to increase food production as well as improve agricultural practices such as sustainable farming. This will also be an opportunity to develop the real economy – an economy run and controlled by the people for the benefit of the people. The chance to return to the soil will be a truly meaningful one.

V. Banoo is a member of PSM and a retired college teacher.

Towards a Peoples' Charter on Trade

D. Jeyakumar

PSM has been part of the network of groups that has objected to some of the trade agreements being negotiated by the Malaysian government. We mobilised against the free trade agreement (FTA) with the US in 2005-06, then against the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2014-16. Now we are part of a group responding critically to the proposals being brought up in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

The person on the street might wonder why PSM is so much against these trade agreements. Is PSM against trade? Or is PSM opposing just for the sake of opposing? Aren't these trade agreements necessary for Malaysia's continued growth?

This article attempts to answer these questions and explain why this sort of trade agreement has become harmful to the global economy. It will also argue that different types of trade agreements are possible, and will proceed to sketch out the broad principles of people-centric trade agreements.



Michael Froman, former US Trade Representative.

Is PSM against free trade?

According to the Treasury's Economic Report 2016/17, the value of Malaysia's exports of goods and services in 2016 was RM829 billion in current prices. This is 69% of our gross domestic product (GDP).¹ If we factor in the value of intermediate goods imported in order to manufacture electronic components and other exported goods, we would find that approximately 33% of value-added in Malaysia is for export. And that's a huge percentage. So obviously, no sane Malaysian would argue that Malaysia should cease trading. Engaging in the world market

is an important source of income for the nation, and this engagement obviously has to continue.

What PSM is protesting is the fact that trade agreements are being used to promote other, non-trade-related issues which benefit the super-rich. Barriers to free trade are regulations such as import taxes and tariffs. But the current trade agreements (e.g., TPP and RCEP) devote a lot more attention to other issues such as:

I. The rights of foreign investors. The TPP, for example, enshrines the following as the inalienable rights of foreign investors:

- a. To receive “national treatment”, which means that Third World governments will now be restricted from taking special steps to develop the capacity of local businesses.²
- b. To be free of all requirements to develop local expertise or purchase from local suppliers.³
- c. To invest in any sector of the economy that is open to private capital, whether it be water supply, power generation or healthcare provision.²
- d. The right to bypass the Malaysian legal system and take their disputes with our government directly to a private international tribunal where the same group of lawyers change hats from being litigants to being judges from case to case!⁴

II. Intellectual property rights (IPRs) which will strengthen the monopoly position that many large multinational corporations (MNCs) already enjoy in the pharmaceutical and IT sectors:

- a. Patent periods are extended using newer regulations.⁵
- b. The onus of initiating action against patent infringements is being shifted from the originator company to governments.
- c. Copyright laws on books and Internet knowledge are being strengthened. (Did you know that a

three-month course of sofosbuvir, an anti-viral drug, can cure 95% of hepatitis C patients? Unfortunately, most of the 300,000 patients with hepatitis C in Malaysia cannot afford this drug, which currently costs RM150,000 for a three-month course for one patient. This is because Malaysia is party to some of the IPR agreements that exist. A three-month course of sofosbuvir can be obtained in India for just RM4,000. But Malaysian pharmacies are barred from procuring from India because it would infringe patent laws. So IPR issues are not boring issues that belong only in the realm of academia; they impact on the lives of ordinary Malaysians!)

III. The right to bring in capital and to take out profits in any amount and at any time.⁶ The government’s powers to regulate capital movement are severely restricted.

Precisely because countries like Malaysia need trade with the US and the European Union, the governments of the West are using trade agreements to “liberalise” the global economy in ways that benefit the billionaire class – the richest 0.001% of the population of the world.

Liberalisation of the global economy is a major factor exacerbating the economic malaise afflicting the world

The collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the ensuing liberalisation of the world

economy through the agreements of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the various free trade agreements that have been concluded, have resulted in the following processes:

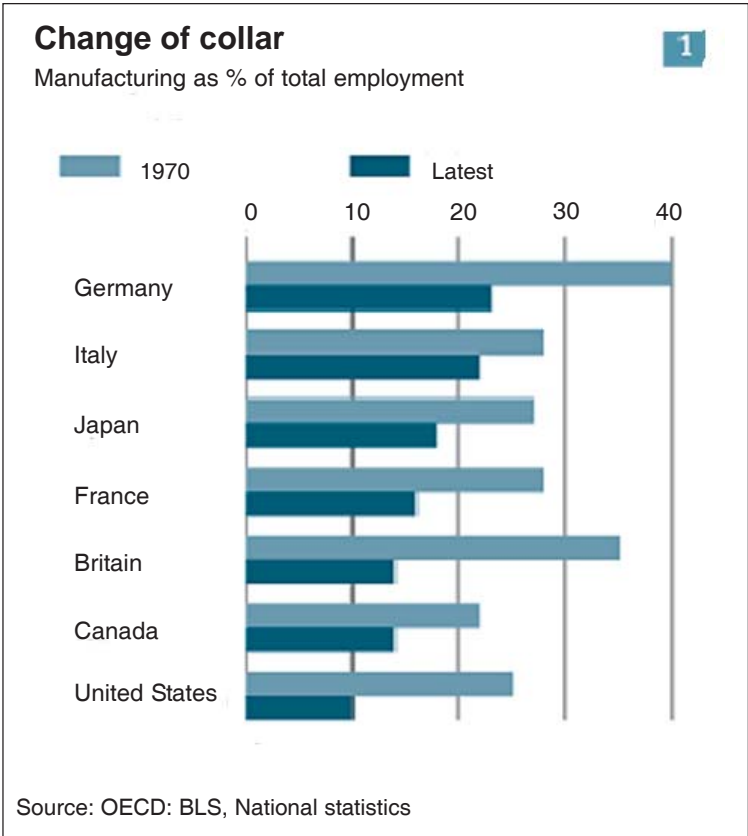
- a. The **offshoring of production** by MNCs from the advanced economies of Europe and the US to Third World countries where wages are about a tenth of wages in the advanced countries.⁷
- b. Production in Third World countries is often outsourced to independent Third World contractors which the MNCs play off against each other to keep production costs and wages down (see Appendix 1 for the example of the iPhone).
- c. The MNCs sell these cheaply produced goods in the advanced countries at 80-90% of the prices that existed prior to the outsourced production. They still make fabulous profits since their production costs are now only 10% of what they were before.
- d. The MNCs shift their headquarters to tax havens so that they can avoid paying taxes in their home country (whose military they still rely on to maintain the world (dis)order).
- e. The MNCs also use transfer pricing to declare a large portion of their profits in the tax havens

so as to avoid paying taxes (see Appendix 2 for an explanation of this).

- f. Countries all over the world have been reducing corporate taxes in an effort to keep their corporations at home. In Malaysia corporate tax has dropped from 40% of profits in the 1980s to 25% currently. We are still “chasing” Singapore, whose rate stands at 20% currently – it’s a “race to the bottom”.

These processes have in turn resulted in:

- A net loss of purchasing power by the working class. The majority of displaced industrial workers in the advanced countries are either chronically unemployed or re-employed in jobs that are less secure and offer lower pay. Factory jobs have increased in the Third World, but wages are 10 times lower than in the West.
- Drop in corporate tax income in many countries because of tax dodging by the MNCs and the billionaire class. This has led to runaway sovereign debt in many countries of the world and pressures to reduce the social safety nets in these countries.
- Fabulous profits for the richest 0.001%. According to a 2016 report by the international charity Oxfam, the top 1% of the planet’s population own more wealth than the rest of the world combined. In



Source: *The Economist*, 2015

2010, 388 individuals held as much wealth as the poorer 50% of the world’s population, but by 2015 the wealth of the poorer 50% was matched by the richest 62 individuals.

The net result of all this is that global aggregate demand does not grow sufficiently to provide investment opportunities for all the surplus profits of the billionaire class. Hence you have:

- low investment rates
- chronic unemployment especially among the youth
- budgetary constraints for governments and an increasingly high debt
- diversion of some of the surplus profits into real

property and the explosion of land and property prices, and the resulting homelessness among the millennial generation.⁸

The stubborn recession that the world is experiencing is directly due to the fact that too much of the income of the world is being sequestered in the investment portfolios of the super-rich – the billionaire class.

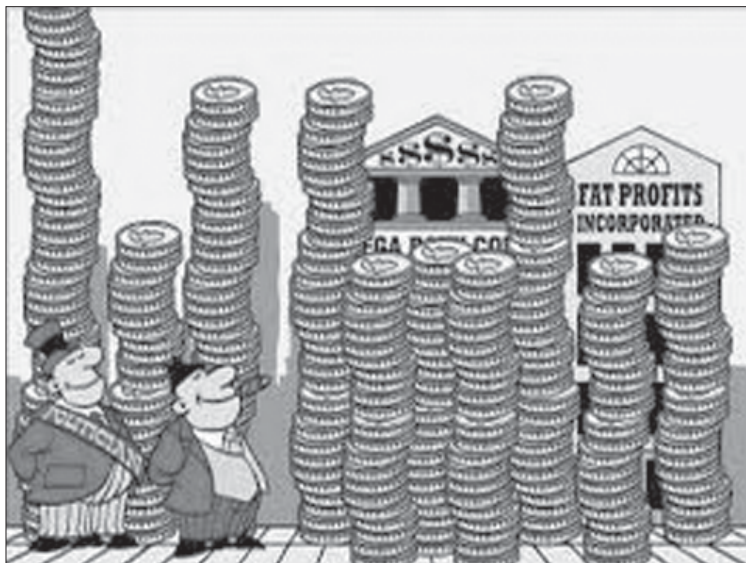
The TPPs and the RCEPs strive to further liberalise the world economy in ways that will enable the super-rich and the MNCs to garner an even larger share of the wealth being produced. Obviously that’s only going to aggravate

sluggishness of demand growth and recessionary tendencies in the global economy.

Features of a people-centric trade agreement

A people-centric trade agreement would attempt to correct the imbalances that have been created by a global economic order that gives far too many perks to the billionaire class. Just as the existing billionaire-centric trade agreements use the carrot-and-stick mechanism of market access and punitive tariffs to create an environment more favourable for the huge MNCs, the people should lobby for agreements that use the same carrots and sticks (i.e., access to markets and tariffs) to achieve economic benefits for the majority. Such agreements would aim:

- To redistribute a greater share of the nation's income to the poorest 80% of the population by increasing the minimum wage in stages. This would grow aggregate demand and thus stimulate investments and job creation. Small and medium-sized businesses would have a larger market to sell to. It would be a win-win situation for 90% of the population!
- To close tax loopholes and ensure that the richest companies pay their fair share of taxes. There should also be gradual elevation of corporate tax rates. This



Aggregate demand growth stunted by sequestration of wealth in top 0.001%.

would need the cooperation of all the countries in the region as otherwise, there would be capital flight out of the country that is unilaterally raising corporate taxes.

- To be more strict regarding the awarding of patent or copyright rights especially for goods and services that relate to healthcare and to education. Much of the IPR standards in existing trade agreements creates monopoly conditions for the large MNCs – this reality has to be exposed!
- The so-called investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) system under existing trade agreements has to be totally revamped. The foreign investor will have to file its claims in the host nation's courts first and can take the claim to an international tribunal

only upon exhaustion of remedies within the host country's own legal system (or if there are inordinate delays in the host country's legal process). The international tribunal should be comprised of three judges from three of the countries participating in the trade agreement but which are not involved in the dispute being litigated. In the TPP setting, for example, this would mean that in the case of a US firm suing Malaysia, the three judges sitting on the tribunal would be drawn from three of the other 10 countries participating in the TPP, i.e., not from the US or from Malaysia. And the trial should take place in Malaysia so that local groups and communities affected by the firm's activities can attend the trial. It should be clearly



G77 Conference.

stated that environmental and health issues take precedence over company profits in ISDS litigation.

A practical example

We need to work with the peoples' movements in other ASEAN countries to lobby for the ASEAN Free Trade Area treaty to incorporate an additional agreement that all participating countries commit to increasing their minimum wage by 10% every year for the next five years. This would increase the domestic market within ASEAN and present more business opportunities for entrepreneurs in ASEAN countries. If a certain ASEAN country does not comply with the minimum wage increase, its exports to the other ASEAN countries should be charged a cumulative import tax of 5% for each year that it fails to comply.

In a similar manner, all ASEAN countries should agree to increase corporate tax by 1 percentage point each year until

they reach a tax level that is 40% of profits. This would augment government income which can then be used to provide a better safety net for the population and to fund the switch to non-polluting sources of electricity generation. The increase in government expenditure would also augment aggregate demand in the ASEAN region and thus provide a deeper market for ASEAN businesses. ASEAN countries that fail to increase their corporate tax as stipulated should face an additional tariff on the goods and services they export to other ASEAN countries.

The creation of deeper domestic markets in Asian and African countries would play a big part in weaning the developing countries off their dependence on the US and EU markets.

Runaway greed on the part of the billionaire class is a major cause of our economic problems today. The solution lies in curbing the excessive power and privileges that the super-rich enjoy and creating a

more inclusive and environmentally sustainable economy. An important component of that solution is the realisation that "free" trade agreements have been the battering rams used by the political elites of advanced countries to create this lopsided economy that favours the billionaires. We have to take over these battering rams and put them to use to fashion a more just and stable world.

D. Jeyakumar is PSM Member of Parliament for Sg. Siput and a member of the PSM Central Committee.

Notes

1. The Economic Report of the Ministry of Finance.
2. National treatment – Article 9.4 of the TPP.
3. Articles 9.9 and 9.10 of the TPP.
4. ISDS – Article 9.18 of the TPP.
5. Evergreening – Article 18.37 of the TPP; data exclusivity – Article 18.52 of the TPP.
6. Capital control – Article 9.8 of the TPP.
7. Monthly minimum wage (from Internet sources):
 - US: US\$10.50 (per hour) x 8 hours x 26 days x 4.4 (exchange rate) = RM9,609
 - Australia: A\$17.70 (per hour) x 8 hours x 26 days x 3.33 (exchange rate) = RM12,149
 - Malaysia: RM1,000 (for Peninsular Malaysia)
 - China: US\$327 (per month) x 4.4 (exchange rate) = RM1,438 (for Shanghai – the highest rate).
8. Those born between 1982-2004.

Taking on religious fundamentalism

Nasir Hashim

ANY conflict or phenomenon has its push-pull factors, with the interplay of particular contradictions, in this case, the mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship between imperialist globalisation and the momentum of jihadist Islamic fundamentalism. We need to specify the key factors and seek the pattern and the circumstances leading to the turn to violent means:

A. The impact of imperialism, neoliberalism and under-development on socio-economic disparity and the political malaise that ensues.

B. Alienation due to:

- i. exploitation at the workplace
- ii. corrupt leaders who supposedly symbolise the integrity of Islam but instead betray the people
- iii. ever-growing repression, arbitrary killing, neglect
- iv. dearth of socio-economic and educational opportunities for upward mobility juxtaposed with blatant corruption, cronyism, nepotism and abuse of power
- v. plunder of national resources and virtual control of the state apparatus by the super-powers (assisted by local

compradors).

C. Racial and religious-based mobilisation: Due to overall sensitivity, race and religion have always been effective tools to mobilise people against each other. It is made worse when the government of the day also exploits the situation by flirting with this explosive combination. The nurturing of the culture of suspicion, fear and hate eventually leads to violence and violation of human rights.

D. The role of imperialist countries in co-opting and conflagrating the Muslim Sunni-Shia religious divide, so as to further big-power ambitions in the region, cannot be understated. The faultlines in the Middle East, drawn up by Britain and France, continue to be the source of many of today's conflicts. In particular,

the creation of the state of Israel in the heart of Muslim lands continues to be a major destabilising factor in the Middle East. Religious and racial conflicts have been magnified as diversionary tactics to shift the blame away from Western colonial slaughter and to foster the age-old myth that religion is the cause of all wars.

Islam often associated with violence

Islam is placed in the forefront when terrorism, fundamentalism, jihadism and violence are mentioned in the international media. As such, we need to analyse the scenarios that have led to the spectre of Muslims killing Muslims. We also have to study the tenets of the Quran, the character of Prophet



ISIS soldiers.

Muhammad pbuh and the existing Authentic Hadiths (*Hadis Sahih*) so that we can have a clear perspective of the position of Islam on violence.

The Quran lays down the guidance for governance. It is a divine statement against dictatorship or authoritarianism. “Thus it is by Allah’s mercy that thou art gentle on them. And hadst thou been rough, hard-hearted, they would certainly have dispersed from around thee. So pardon them and ask protection for them, and consult them in important matters” (Quran 3:159). The statement “Allah’s Mercy precedes His wrath” embodies the universal and dynamic concept of Islam; compromise (tolerance); forgiveness; love; consultation; and piety (Quran 6:12, 54; Hadith Qudsi). In fact, the Quran does not permit sectarianism and divisions existing within Islam today (Quran 6:159). Yet some religious leaders choose to ignore this and instead prefer the Authentic Hadiths (see below) to guide their everyday life.

War is permitted in Islam, but with caveats that it is only permitted for self-defence or in response to continuous and blatant violations of covenants or against those who consciously promote destruction of properties and violence in the communities. Retribution for violence and wars is nullified through acts of forgiveness by aggrieved parties, repentance of individuals and compensations to aggrieved parties. The accused is given the benefit of

the doubt, with option to repent and be judged with mercy. Quranic verses often include frightening threats with exhortations to repent, for those who commit violence and crimes. Here are some examples:

- Killing stopped if they desire to repent, withdraw, offer peace or restrain their hands (Quran 4:89-91).
- Stop fighting if there is no more persecution (Quran 8:38-40).
- Attack and ambush them. But they are free to leave if they repent (Quran 9:5).
- Fighting and killing stopped when war terminates (Quran 47:4).
- Fight those who fight you but do not transgress (Quran 2:290-294).

The Quran places a high premium on human life. Quran 5:32 states that whoever kills a person unjustly, it is as though he had killed all mankind. And whoever saves a life, it is as though he had saved all mankind.

The Hadiths

It is generally accepted that the Hadiths are the collection of the words and traditions of Muhammad transmitted orally by those of religious integrity. The Prophet (pbuh) did not allow Hadiths to be written about him during his lifetime for he held that the Quran is complete by itself. This instruction was respected for more than 250 years after his passing. But such

instruction was rescinded by Imam Shafi’i and the feudal Caliph Umar Aziz (not referring to one of the Companions of the Prophet, Umar Khattab) and the recording of the Hadiths began.

Imam Bukhari, the eventual author of the book *Hadis Sahih Bukhari*, filtered 600,000 of the collected Hadiths to finally accept more than 2,000 Hadiths as being the Authentic Hadiths or *Hadis Sahih*. The debunking of such a high percentage of Hadiths as false does not reflect well on the integrity and calibre of the so-called religious transmitters of the Hadiths of that time.

Despite such thorough vetting of the Hadiths, discrepancies and contradictions exist in the six books of the present-day Authentic Hadiths, the most referred books being *Hadis Sahih Bukhari* and *Hadis Sahih Muslim*. Unfortunately some of the Authentic Hadiths endorse violence. It has been argued that some of the Authentic Hadiths reflect the cultures of the pre-Islamic period and represent a return to the age of ignorance (*jahiliyyah*) – the backward cultures of tribal warlords and the crude feudal system that promote violence, intolerance, homosexual relations with children, incest and crucifixion which were the norms of governance during the *jahiliyyah* period.

Today, there is a risk of the Authentic Hadiths subtly replacing the Quran through the syariah laws. Due to the discrepancies in the Hadiths, Muslim extremists have the

‘privilege’ of choosing which contradictory Hadith best legitimises the killing of other Muslims. This is made worse by religious leaders with a political agenda who consciously misconstrue the Quran and exploit the Hadiths for political gain.

The Islamic state

Islamic scholars are in a dilemma on the concept of the Islamic state. Asghar Ali Engineer made a thorough examination of the Quran, the Hadiths and other literature, and concluded that there is no such concept of Islamic state in the Quran. Prophet Muhammad’s Medina Charter (*Mithaq-i-Madina*) was a pact between various tribal and religious groups like the Jews, Christians and other pagan tribes to form a cohesive community. The Charter was based upon mutual consultations and the participating groups were free to follow their own religions, laws and traditions. The community as a whole was required to consult each other and protect Medina city if under attack from outside forces.

The Prophet’s aim was not to build a political community but instead a religious community. Perhaps he foresaw that a state, without due balance, will eventually become dictatorial, elitist and self-serving and exert control through threats and violence. The Prophet emphasised values, ethics and morality, not any political doctrine. He spoke

of the centrality of justice (*adl*) and benevolence (*ihsan*). He strongly opposed oppression (*zulm*) and injustice (*‘udwan*). He defined the principles of good governance. Muslims do not need an Islamic state to practise Islam because religious duties revolve around the concept of *ad-Deen* (the pious way of life) which includes *tawhid* (invocation of unity), prayer, fasting, donations to the poor (*zakat*) and the performing of the haj.

There are several verses in the Quran that support the assertion that Islam envisages an inclusive society, not a tightly controlled, punitive and authoritarian one. Plurality in society is what Allah willed:

- “For each among you We have appointed a law and a way. And had God willed, He would have made you one community, but [He willed otherwise], that He might try you in that which He has given you. So vie with one another in good deeds” (Quran 5:48).
- “O mankind! Indeed We created you from a single [pair] of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other [not hate each other]” (Quran 49:13).

Unfortunately the attempts being taken to create an Islamic State have led to strife, bloodshed and destruction despite the fact that killing another soul is forbidden in Islam.

What is to be done?

It is wise to remind ourselves that the Sunni and the Shia lived together in harmony for many centuries before their societies were rent apart by colonialism and later imperialism. Marriages between Shia and Sunni were common and were a non-issue in the past. The current rising tensions in the Middle East reflect a growing friction rooted in competition over power, rights and resources, which has created and exacerbated conflict within the ummah.

Muslims are now trapped by rituals and technicalities, and have become paralysed by fear that every move they make can be construed as blasphemous and that punitive action will be taken against them. They are bound not by love but by fear and punishment. Engaging people and having open discussions is not practised.

There is a dire need to review the Authentic Hadiths so that they truly reflect the teachings of the Quran, do not denigrate Prophet Muhammad and do not add to or abrogate verses from the Quran. Failing to do so would mean that the teachings of the Quran regarding an inclusive, harmonious and just society will remain ignored.

Nasir Hashim is Chairman of PSM. The above is extracted from a paper presented at the Socialism 2016 conference held in Kuala Lumpur on 25-27 November 2016.

Does enacting harsh laws make us more Islamic?

Ahmad Farouk Musa

MUCH has been debated about the amendments to the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965.¹ A massive demonstration in support of the bill was held in February 2017 and tensions are running high. PAS has insisted that the main aim of the proposed amendment is not to introduce hudud but to strengthen the syariah laws and syariah courts.

But if that is true, then PAS for sure must have identified the weaknesses. To the general observer, the weaknesses are apparent and appalling. Just look at the number of cases of women abandoned by their husbands and children denied their maintenance. Or the prolonged cases of fasakh (annulment of marriage). These cases sometimes take years to resolve, if they are ever settled. Most of the time, it is due to the failure of the men to show up in court. And most of the time this is deliberate; they want to “teach a lesson” to the women.

This is a clear manifestation of injustice. It is injustice committed in the syariah courts and in the name of Islam, with no foreseeable remedy. If indeed one really wants to strengthen the syariah system, wouldn't it be more meaningful to strengthen the implementation of Islamic family



The PAS demo of February 2017.

law? This is a law that falls under the ambit of the syariah courts. When one has failed to strengthen this aspect of the law, it looks rather foolish and irresponsible to focus on criminal matters and to increase the severity of punishments.

Why this preoccupation with severe punishments? Even if one argued that the amended version proposed in November 2016² is deemed constitutional since it did not have the same overarching principle that intrudes into the Federal Constitution as in the May 2016 amendment, why the need for harsh punishments? Will they really “strengthen” the syariah courts when we know for sure that the glaring weaknesses are not being tackled?

Wouldn't the religion of Islam look more just when the so-called guardians of the faith fight for the rights of the

abandoned wives and neglected children? And does the imposition of such harsh laws make us more Islamic in the eyes of God? We have to ask ourselves, were we not imbued with the notion that the most noble thing to be done is to dispense justice? In this regard, a renowned student of Ibn Taimiyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah,³ in his book *I'lam al-Muwaqi'in* said: “The foundation of shariah is wisdom and the safeguarding of people's interest in this world and in the next. In its entirety, it is justice, mercy, and wisdom.”

Every rule which turns justice into tyranny, mercy into cruelty, good into evil, and wisdom into triviality, does not belong to the syariah, even though it might have been introduced therein by implication.

“The shariah is God's

justice and mercy. Life, nutrition, medicine, recuperation and virtue are made possible by it. Every good that exists is derived from it, and every deficiency is the result of its loss and dissipation. For the syariah, which God entrusted to His Prophet to transmit, is the pillar of the world and the key to success and happiness in this world and the next.”

It becomes obvious then that the ultimate aim of syariah, like the aim and purpose of any law in the world, is to establish justice and to preserve and promote human welfare. And since the syariah did not come to us in a codified form, it requires our human agency to approximate God’s justice. And as humans, we might err. But to err in approximating God’s justice is better than to enforce something because it is believed to be the will of God.

We should not gravitate towards becoming a Taliban state by imposing harsh syariah criminal laws when we have failed to solve mundane issues such as divorce and alimony in our syariah courts, or more pressing issues like economic equality and good governance.

When some people are still living in makeshift tents after the floods of two years ago, when getting clean and colourless water is still a main problem even after 20 years under our rule, and when many of our youths are still unemployed with a high rate of intravenous drug users among them, to prioritise pushing for harsher penalties for personal offences only proves that we have failed to understand Fiqh Awlawiyyat, or the juris-

prudence of priorities, in decision-making. Does lashing someone a hundred times for fornication make us warriors of Islam or defenders of the laws of God?

The Prophet himself was very reluctant to impose a hadd punishment on an adulterer who made a confession. When Ma’iz al-Aslami confessed his act of adultery to the Prophet, the Prophet refused to engage him in conversation and turned his face away. While we acknowledge there are variations in the report, what transpired was that the Prophet finally asked, after avoiding Ma’iz the fourth time, whether Ma’iz was sane. Then he asked whether Ma’iz really knew what fornication meant or “you only kissed her, or winked at her, or checked her out?” Lastly, the Prophet asked Ma’iz or his people if he had ever been married.

These three elements plus the Prophet’s act of turning his face away from Ma’iz can only be interpreted as an extreme reluctance to apply the hadd punishment. The Prophet’s intention was clearly to allow Ma’iz to rethink and to be left alone so that he could repent. Now compare this noble attitude of the Prophet with that of the Taliban in PAS today. Mercy and compassion are alien to them, although mercy is traditionally considered to be the all-pervasive objective of the syariah.

Looking at the political situation in this country and the timing for such a divisive issue to be given centrestage, leads us to one main conclusion – that the main beneficiary from

this commotion is none other than the ruling government.

Dr. Ahmad Farouk Musa is director of the Islamic Renaissance Front, a think-tank promoting reform and renewal in Muslim thought.

20 February 2017

Notes

1. Dato Seri Hadi Awang, the President of the Islamic party PAS, tabled a private member’s bill in April 2015 to raise the maximum punishments that can be prescribed by the syariah courts from the current three years’ imprisonment, RM5,000 fine and six lashes of the cane to “any sentence allowed by Islamic Law in respect of the offence mentioned”.
2. Hadi Awang’s initial proposal was to permit punishment as specified by the syariah. This would have included “rejam” or stoning for adultery. However, this was amended in the March 2016 tabling as any syariah-compliant punishment except for the death sentence. Hadi’s latest amended Bill, tabled in December 2016, specifies the new maximums of 30 years’ imprisonment, RM100,000 fine and 100 lashes.
3. Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah was born in a small farming village near Damascus, Syria, in 1292 CE, and he studied Islamic jurisprudence, theology and the science of prophetic traditions. At the age of 21 he joined the study circle of Imam Ibn Taimiyyah and later on became his successor. (CE = Common Era = AD)

This is not apostasy

D. Jeyakumar

DARSHINI, a 20-year-old mother, came to my service centre in Sg Siput in December 2015 asking for help. She was having difficulty in procuring a birth certificate for her 2-month-old baby. For Darshini herself did not have an identity card as she had refused to receive one that specified Islam as her religion.

Darshini is one of the several hundred Malaysians who, despite being registered as “Muslim” at birth, were brought up in a non-Muslim environment. In Darshini’s case, her mother, a non-practising Indian Muslim, left Darshini in the care of her Hindu husband’s family when Darshini was 8 years old. Darshini’s mum never did come back, and Darshini was brought up in a Hindu environment, attending temple ceremonies with the rest of the family. She married a Hindu boy in a traditional ceremony but has not been able to register her marriage – the authorities require that her husband convert to Islam before allowing registration.

There is a path out of Islam for people like Darshini. But it is through the syariah courts. Article 121(1A) of the Federal Constitution states that



Mahkamah Syariah Ipoh.

the civil courts do not have jurisdiction over matters that are under the purview of the syariah system, and the Administration of the Religion of Islam (Perak) 2004 Enactment defines Muslims as including those with one or both parents who were Muslim at the time of their birth (Section 2). And Section 50(3)(b)(x) of the same Enactment specifies that “declaring that a person is no longer a Muslim” is one of the powers of the Syariah High Court.

However, though a path out does exist, it is quite difficult to traverse. I have thus far referred 10 cases like Darshini’s to syariah lawyers in

Ipoh. So far only two have obtained the declaration that they are “no longer Muslims”. The rest are stuck in the process, and some of these cases were filed more than five years ago.

I have come to realise that the problem is in the formulation of Section 50(3)(b)(x). The phrase “no longer a Muslim” carries the connotation that the person concerned was a Muslim at some point in time. That would imply that the lawyer representing her is somehow aiding and abetting apostasy – considered one of the bigger syariah offences! That is why many syariah lawyers are reluctant to push for the

resolution of their cases – they do not want to seem too eager in helping a person “leave” Islam.

I decided to try a new tactic for Darshini – prepare for her the necessary documents and teach her how to represent herself. First I wrote to the Perak Religious Department, the Jabatan Agama, asking for an appointment so that I could explain to them that I am not anti-Islam and that this is not apostasy – Darshini never practised Islam, so how can she be deemed to be coming out of it? However, despite three letters and several calls, the Jabatan Agama refused to give a date for us to meet.

We then filed the syariah court papers – with statutory declarations by her two grandmothers, her husband, her neighbour and the temple priest. I took care to state clearly in her affidavit (prepared with the help of a PSM member whose wife is a syariah lawyer) that Darshini had never practised Islam and as such could not be considered as leaving Islam. Her affidavit also stated that she respects all religions including Islam, but that she wishes to continue in the religion that she was brought up in.

The first four hearing dates saw our case being postponed because the respondent, the Jabatan Agama, did not attend. I then prepared a polite letter in Darshini’s name explaining how her husband and the other witnesses had taken leave from work to attend court four times. The hearing proceeded at the

next sitting. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the syariah court judge was gentle with Darshini and her witnesses. He himself conducted the cross-examination of her witnesses, speaking to them in simple Malay. The Jabatan Agama never turned up. At the next date, he gave her the declaration that she had petitioned for – that she was no longer a Muslim. All in all, it took 10 months.

There are some critics who argue that it was wrong on my part to acknowledge the jurisdiction of the syariah courts over individuals like Darshini – that we should attempt to change the definition of “Muslim” in the Administration of the Religion of Islam (Perak) 2004 Enactment to include the phrase “and who is currently practising Islam”. They feel that “injustices” such as this should be highlighted in the media and a thorough revamp be carried out. My response to them has been – the resolution of Darshini’s problem was my main goal. I did not want to make her a pawn in a contentious political blame game. As Deng Xiaoping once said, it does not matter if a cat is black or white as long as it catches mice! If the syariah courts can dispense justice, why not work through them? But if the syariah court had not been so reasonable, at some point I would have had to take a different approach.

I did try to take an extra step. I tried to amend the Administration of the Religion of Islam Enactment for the

Federal Territory as this comes under the Federal Parliament. I put up a private member’s bill seeking to include an extra clause in Section 46(2)(x) of the Administration of the Religion of Islam (Federal Territory) 1993 Enactment that read “to declare a person is not a Muslim because he or she has never practised Islam since young” as an additional power of the Syariah High Court. I feel that such a clause would make the path out a little easier for people in Darshini’s situation.

Quite predictably, the Speaker spiked my bill in chambers, as he has done to the half a dozen or so other private member’s bills that I authored. When I pressed him for his reason for disallowing this bill, he said that Islam came under the Malay rulers and I had not consulted the Agong!

In the meantime, something interesting happened – a lady with a problem like Darshini’s recently went to the Ipoh syariah court registration counter to ask them how to proceed. One of the staff advised her to seek my assistance and even supplied her my handphone number! I was tickled, and also reassured that there are people in the syariah system who do not see me as an adversary but as almost an ally in helping resolve the inter-religious complications that must come up from time to time in a multi-religious society.

D. Jeyakumar is PSM Member of Parliament for Sg Siput.

Say “No” to forced disappearances

FORCED disappearances are a new phenomenon in Malaysia. Over the past seven months, four people have been disappeared. They are Pastor Joshua Hilmy and his wife, Ruth, who have not been heard of since November 2016; Amri Che Mat, who was abducted by a group of men from near his house in Perlis on 24 November 2016; and Pastor Raymond Koh, whose abduction on 13 February 2017 was captured on a video which later went viral.

There are several features that are common to these cases. The first is that all of these victims of abduction are individuals that hardline Islamic groups might consider as “enemies of Islam” –Joshua is a Muslim who converted to Christianity, there are allegations that Amri is Shia, and Koh has been previously suspected of converting Muslims to Christianity. Amri and Koh were involved in charity programmes for the poor. Amri ran an NGO called Perlis Hope while Koh’s NGO Harapan Komuniti reached out to single mothers and drug addicts of all races. Both Amri and Koh were abducted in



Amri Che Mat and Pastor Raymond Koh.

efficiently executed “special forces”-type operations that involved several vehicles and more than a dozen persons.

Another striking similarity between these cases is that the Malaysian police have not been able to throw any light on these abductions. This is, by the way, the same police force that was able, within days of the assassination of Kim Jong-nam at KLIA2 on 14 February 2017, to name names, apprehend suspects, identify the chemicals used and trace the escape route of the suspects who had fled!

The police obviously do have the capacity to investigate in a rapid and efficient manner when they choose to get to the

bottom of the matter at hand. But in this series of abductions, they have been extremely sluggish and ineffectual. This has raised questions regarding any relation between the police and what appears to be a well-organised and well-funded vigilante squad behind these abductions. Is this vigilante squad state-sanctioned? And will the weakness of the government’s response to the abductions embolden them to widen their scope of targets? Pakistan’s slide into sectarian violence began similarly with state-sanctioned Islamic militias which were then considered as a “third line of defence” against arch-foe India. Many Malaysians are



Koh's car trapped between SUVs.

worried!

In light of these developments, some 48 civil society organisations have jointly established the Citizen Action Group on Enforced Disappearance (CAGED) to monitor such cases. The press statement on the founding of CAGED on 5 May 2017 is reproduced in full below:

The formation of the Citizen Action Group on Enforced Disappearance (CAGED)

Today we wish to announce the formation of the Citizen Action Group on Enforced Disappearance (CAGED) to monitor cases of

enforced disappearance in Malaysia. In the last two months, civil society organisations led by Suaram have been monitoring with great concern the mysterious abductions of Pastor Raymond Koh and Amri Che Mat, and the disappearance of Pastor Joshua Hilmy and his wife, Ruth.

After more than 5 months since the disappearances of Amri Che Mat, Joshua Hilmy and Ruth, and coming to 3 months since Raymond Koh's abduction, the police are no closer to solving these crimes. Based on CCTV footage and eye-witness accounts of the abductions of Pastor Raymond and Amri, where professionally trained personnel seem to be

involved and the fact that till today no ransom demands have been made for all cases, we have to assume that they are victims of "enforced disappearance".

Article 2 of the United Nations International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance defined "Enforced Disappearance" as "...the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law."

The objectives of CAGED are:

1. To push the State to respect and to inform the public in general, of the fundamental right to life, personal liberty, the right to move freely and the right to a fair trial of all persons within our borders.
2. To help victims of enforced disappearances and their families to seek justice and redress.
3. To create awareness of the cases and issues of enforced disappearance to the public so that the horrors of enforced disappearance are exposed and rejected by society.



Candlelight vigil.

4. To coordinate advocacy actions with citizen groups throughout the nation and globally.

With the formation of CAGED, we wish to announce the following initiatives, some of which are a continuation of what the working group had started even before formation.

1. On 7th April, 2017, we came out with a statement that was endorsed by 46 non-governmental organisations (NGOs), urging the police to use all resources available to them to resolve these cases and to regularly update the families and the public. We will continue to get more organisations to endorse the statement and the work of CAGED.
2. To coordinate nationwide solidarity vigils for the missing persons until there is a closure to each case. Vigils have been organised in over 10 cities and towns nationwide. It is our aim to coordinate them so that we could have at least TWO vigils every week with each location only needing to hold it ONCE a month. In this way, we would ensure that this issue will remain alive in the public sphere and that the missing are not forgotten.
3. To lobby for support and action from local agencies so that pressure



Launching of CAGED.

- will be brought to bear on the State to resolve and to respond to these enforced disappearances. We have already submitted a memorandum to Suhakam (Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Manusia Malaysia) and we plan to make a report to the Enforcement Agency Integrity Commission (EAIC) on the conduct of the investigation by the police thus far.
4. To lobby for support and action from international agencies like the Committee on Enforced Disappearance (CED) under the Office of the High Commissioner of the United Nations for Human Rights (OHCHR) and other international advocacy groups.
5. To assist the families of victims who may need help to highlight their plight and seek justice. We are launching a special hotline phone number and an e-mail

address they can contact us on. The hotline number is 011-2424 4877 and the e-mail address is caged.helpline@gmail.com.

There is a possibility that there are other victims of enforced disappearance that we are unaware of. The families and friends of victims can contact us and we will maintain confidentiality if requested. We are particularly interested in the disappearances of people working on political, religious or social issues and where no ransom monies were demanded.

The issue of enforced disappearance is a new issue in Malaysia. Whether committed by State-sanctioned agencies or not, it is a crime committed against a person and it has no place in a civilised society. If we are not a nation governed by the rule of law, we will become a lawless nation. If as citizens, we do not speak up our rejection of enforced disappearance, we become complicit to it and this will only encourage repetitions of it.

Our misplaced defence priorities

Kua Kia Soong



Rafale fighter jet.

FRENCH President Francois Hollande was here recently on a charm offensive to persuade Prime Minister Najib Razak to buy his country's multi-billion-ringgit defence equipment, namely, Dassault Aviation SA's Rafale fighter jets. The Rafale is seen as a frontrunner as Malaysia looks to buy up to 18 jets in a deal potentially worth more than RM9 billion. That's not bad going, considering the French had already succeeded in selling their two Scorpene submarines to Malaysia for more than RM7 billion, the biggest single defence purchase by Malaysia to date.

The French have even started advertising the Rafale fighter jets in our mainstream

newspapers, competing for the attention of Malaysian consumers alongside the bargains offered by Giant and Tesco. British Aerospace are also competing for a slice of Malaysia's defence pie, trying to flog their Typhoons in a RM10 billion deal they hope to clinch with a "buy one, get one free" gambit. The French are desperate to sell their arms because 60% of their exports are made up of arms! They obviously have not heeded the wise words of their literateur Albert Camus who said, "Peace is the only battle worth waging."

The key question is whether Malaysia actually needs any of these fabulous

toys, considering the cost of fighter jets is spiralling way out of control and such 'toys' so quickly become obsolete. Malaysian taxpayers need to be wary of this latest and record-breaking arms deal. Let us not forget the scandal over alleged commissions in that Scorpene submarine deal which led to the grisly murder of the Mongolian lass Altantuya. And let us hope that Michelle Yeoh's Legion d'Honneur is the only deserved sweetener in this deal...

RM500m per fighter jet?

According to Bank Negara, Malaysia's total external debt has risen to RM909 billion in 2016, which is equal to 73.9% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). This raises a red flag about whether we can afford such levels of defence spending at all; importantly, is what we are spending allocated wisely on arms priorities considering our debt situation?

Malaysian taxpayers deserve answers to these key questions: Are multi-role combat aircraft our priority at the moment considering the latest state-of-the-art (US) F35s cost at least half a billion ringgit a piece? And if the most



Malaysian Navy offshore patrol vessel.

advanced US-made fighter jet, the F35 Raptor, costs more than RM500 million, should these French Rafales similarly cost more than RM500 million? Can we see some competitive offers from the other arms merchants of the Gripen and the Typhoons?

Our Defence Ministry says it is planning to replace the Royal Malaysian Air Force's (RMAF) squadron of Russian MiG-29 combat planes, nearly half of which are grounded. Can we have a report on the relative performances of our MiGs, Sukhois, Hawks and F18s all these years so we can understand why nearly half these MiGs are grounded? Can we also have an audit report on the compatibility of our bizarrely diverse Russian, British, US (and now French?) fighter jets and especially the compatibility of their avionic systems? What lessons do our past purchase choices hold for our future fighter jet procurements?

Prime Minister Najib has said Malaysia's defence

spending will continue to grow as our armed forces have embarked on a long-term plan to modernise and upgrade their equipment and that a total of RM26 billion had been allocated under the 11th Malaysia Plan for defence, public order and enforcement.

Who are Malaysia's enemies and what appropriate weaponry do we need?

One would think that this is the first question the Ministry of Defence would ask in the multi-billion-ringgit decisions to procure armaments. Yet our National Defence Policy has never been properly debated in parliament. One of the rare moments we got to use our F18 fighter bombers and Hawk 208 fighter jets was against those invaders described by the Defence Minister as a "rag-tag army" at Lahad Datu a few years ago. Wouldn't armoured cars and tanks and mortars have sufficed in that four-square-kilometre area of land against

that motley crew?

What are our priorities for naval defence?

When the bombardment began at Lahad Datu, it was mentioned that the navy had formed a cordon to prevent the intruders from getting away. It was clear that there never was a cordon to prevent any intruders from getting *into* Sabah all these years. Looking at the geography of the area, our two submarines built by the French DCNS sitting pretty at Sepangar Bay and our six New Generation Patrol Vessels (costing RM9 billion) were not the most suitable vessels in the circumstances. It brings to mind the question of the appropriate vessels that should be the priority for our navy.

As part of the RM5 billion arms deal signed between Dr Mahathir and Margaret Thatcher in 1989, we procured two corvettes built by the Yarrow shipbuilders costing RM2.2 billion (*New Straits Times*, 11 November 1991). At

the time, the Royal Malaysian Navy said they required 16 offshore patrol vessels but due to financial constraints, the RMN could only afford four or five of these locally built OPVs. The Defence Ministry had budgeted RM85 million per OPV (*New Straits Times*, 25 November 1991). Now, in the light of the latest incident at Lahad Datu, Malaysians will be in a better position to see the appropriate vessels that would be more suitable to secure the Sabah coastline.

Before the Lahad Datu incident, our main “enemies” testing the capacity of our armed forces were the pirates in the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca. There were no bigger “enemies” than those seafaring marauders. Are state-of-the-art fighter jets and submarines the appropriate weaponry against pirates? These would likewise be inappropriate if “international terrorists” and suicide bombers choose to target Malaysia.

“Rising tensions in the South China Sea”

We are now told that Malaysia wants to revamp its aging naval fleet in the face of threats from rising tensions in the South China Sea. Malaysia’s navy aims to replace all 50 vessels in its aging fleet and this will be led by the procurement of four littoral mission ships (LMS) built in collaboration with China. The deal is worth more than RM1 billion.

One would imagine that by its reference to “rising



Lahad Datu.

tensions”, the Malaysian government is referring to China’s claims to the disputed islands in the South China Sea. So if China is seen as a possible “enemy”, should China have a hand in the building of these littoral mission ships? It seems a very strange logic in justifying the purchase of these four warships. Or are the ASEAN countries also seen as possible “enemies” since there has been an unspoken arms race among the ASEAN countries through the years which merely exhausts the hard-earned resources of our peoples? Indonesia’s total defence spending has jumped around 26%, and Thailand’s military government has just approved a \$389.05 million submarine deal with China.

The Malaysian navy is reported to be in the final stages of negotiations with French shipbuilder DCNS to build the larger littoral combat ships (LCS), three new multi-role support ships (MRSS) and two more submarines. Knowing the bill for the two Scorpene

submarines was more than RM7 billion, Malaysian taxpayers should be prepared for the worst.

So, exactly how are decisions made in the Ministry of Defence to purchase the submarines, the corvettes, the frigates instead of more patrol boats to guard our coastlines?

With our external debt spiralling towards RM1 trillion, Malaysian taxpayers would do well to question the government’s defence priorities and to call on the government to justify the next multi-billion-ringgit arms procurements with full transparency. Malaysians need to be reminded that with RM1 billion, we can build at least 1,000 rural schools or 100 district hospitals. (Note: We only have just over 1,000 Chinese primary schools and just over 500 Tamil schools today!)

Kua Kia Soong is SUARAM (Suara Rakyat Malaysia) Adviser.

31 March 2017

Who is to blame for road accidents involving lorries?

Mohanarani Rasiah

LORRY drivers who drive recklessly, speed or drive under the influence of drugs have been identified in the media as the main cause of some of the horrific accidents on our roads which have resulted in tragedies affecting many innocent road users and their families.

But in order to arrive at effective measures to reduce the number of accidents caused by lorries, we need to look beyond just the drivers and their share of the blame. No driver who obeys traffic rules needs to fear roadblocks by any agency, be it the JPJ or SPAD. But he would certainly try to avoid these agencies if he is driving a lorry that is not fit to be on the road or is transporting cargo that exceeds the legal weight limit.

The condition of the lorry, its tyres, brakes and decisions regarding the cargo are the domain of transport companies. Transport associations themselves have acknowledged the use of illegally retreaded tyres and its dangers. Overloading, which is said to have hazardous effects on braking and manoeuvres such as sudden lane change or vehicle avoidance, is another major problem. It has been documented that the degree and frequency of overloading in heavy commercial vehicles in



Transport companies overload lorries to compensate for the low rates they quote.

Malaysia is “extremely high”.

Under these circumstances, a substantial number of lorry operators deem it necessary to pay for the services of tontos or tonto-operated smartphone apps to evade law enforcers. Lorry operators are said to pay tontos RM400 per lorry to alert drivers to roadblocks by enforcement agencies.

Employers are also responsible for a number of other decisions that contribute to an unsafe road environment, such as not hiring a co-driver for long-distance freight deliveries. Lengthy work schedules and round-the-clock driving lead to excessive fatigue for lorry drivers. Add to this the monotony of the job, and it is hard to imagine a driver being alert throughout on the road.

Many of these practices stem from cost-cutting by lorry operators at the expense of road safety. This is in order to remain

competitive and maintain profit margins in a sector that is largely unregulated. Currently there are no fixed rental rates for freight transport, thus forcing transport companies to compete with and undercut each other to win contracts from goods suppliers who enjoy an oligopolistic market position.

To maintain their profit margin, lorry operators then find ways to cut costs as in the practices mentioned above. Employers also cut costs by squeezing their drivers such as by under-contributing to the EPF, as recently highlighted by the Lorry Drivers Coalition.

The Transport Minister must urgently look into the need for standardised freight charges as an important and concrete step towards a safer road environment for the Malaysian public.

Mohanarani Rasiah is a member of the PSM Central Committee.

China in the 21st century

Koh Kay Yew

THE emergence of China as an economic power necessitated her fortifying a string of islands in the South China Sea to safeguard her trade and to facilitate development of maritime resources. China possesses only one used aircraft carrier (versus nine in the US navy). As the world's factory, the vulnerability of China's maritime trade, which is surrounded by potentially hostile neighbours from Japan to Singapore, had to be remedied.

China's launch of a modernised overland "New Silk Road" trade route, based on extensive infrastructural investment in ports and pipelines, highways and high-speed train networks through Central Asia and Russia to Pakistan and the Middle East/Europe, will provide a critical alternative lifeline. Transit time on the high-speed trains will be half that of sea transport via the Suez Canal and Malacca Straits. This is complemented by a "Maritime Silk Road" that takes advantage of China's size and connects Yunnan province with the new port of Gwadar built by China in Pakistan which offers direct access to the Indian Ocean.

The Shanghai Cooperation Council provided a new



China's modernised "New Silk Road".

regional framework for China to cooperate with Russia and Central Asian states on economic and security matters, and India, Pakistan and Iran have joined this Council. The US was rejected as a member as member states are not permitted to have foreign military bases.

The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was established in 2015 with Chinese funding of \$1 billion. Fifty-six countries have joined, including Australia and the UK (in spite of US objections). The US and Japan are the only two economic powers that remain outside. The AIIB is the only international financial institution of which the US is not a member. In contrast to the onerous terms of the World

Bank's (and IMF's) 'financial assistance', which is conditioned on internal economic restructuring and austerity, the AIIB offers low-interest loans on flexible terms without any domestic dictates.

According to *Forbes* magazine, China will overtake the US as the world's largest economy by 2018. She is unlikely to emerge as a serious economic rival to the US given that her per capita gross domestic product (GDP) is still much lower, the renminbi currency is only semi-convertible, her lower technology base, ageing population, and reliance on foreign energy and commodities, among others. Moreover, China faces immense domestic problems ranging from acute



THAAD missile defence system.

pollution to periodic mass unrest. However, her huge manufacturing base offers a fertile seedbed for technological innovations over time, as validated by the development of her solar panel industry which now leads the rest of the world. China's focus on renewable energy offers the best hope for sustainable economic growth and environmental improvement.

The abortion by Trump of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which focused more on investor rights of multinational corporations than on free trade (with only five out of its 29 chapters devoted to trade) and subordinated national sovereignty to foreign private interests, has created the opportunity for the implementation of a free trade grouping inclusive of China based on reciprocal benefit, given that China is now the largest trading partner of most Asian states. This will help to offset any new tariff barriers imposed by the US on Asian exports.

What is the potential for Thucydides's trap forecast by

some observers, namely that an established but declining power will resort to war with an emerging rival that challenges her hegemony? The Rand Corporation sponsored a study in 2016 on "War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable", which projected that a war with China after 2025 will inflict higher costs on the US given China's continued growth, but added that Japan's participation will greatly mitigate US losses.

Japan's remilitarisation under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has revived the dormant anti-war movement with intense public opposition to US military bases in Okinawa.

Meanwhile North Korea's testing of an inter-continental ballistic missile was used to justify the earlier installation of the THAAD missile defence system in South Korea – in spite of strong public opposition – in order to preempt potential opposition from the new South Korean president, who at the time had yet to be elected. While THAAD is ostensibly targeted

at North Korea, China believes she is the real target.

In the final analysis, any assessment of the potential for China's emergence to global leadership that rivals US hegemony will depend on her resolution of many domestic challenges, including the following:

1. Can the Chinese state maintain the "social harmony" so highly desired by the ruling elite, given the slower economic growth and less cooperative US position?
2. Can the Chinese Communist Party remain outside the control of the new billionaire class that has emerged under capitalism?
3. Can the gaping and growing inequality in income and wealth be contained and the contradictions within the Chinese population remain non-antagonistic?
4. Will China develop into a sub-imperialist state and exploit the wealth and resources of the countries of the South for her own benefit based on unequal exchange?
5. Can domestic pollution be brought under control and replaced by a sustainable economy and renewable energy?

Koh Kay Yew is a former President of the Socialist Club of the University of Malaya in Singapore.

Does Venezuela's crisis prove socialism doesn't work?

Ryan Mallett-Outtrim

“THIS can't go on much longer,” I thought to myself as I waited in line in the tropical heat. Perhaps 30 people were still in front of me, and the supermarket guards were letting people in at a sluggish pace that just made me want to groan in exasperation. To kill some time while I waited to buy groceries, I decided to try interviewing someone. I picked a middle-aged woman behind me, and asked her how she felt about the lines outside supermarkets, the shortages of consumer goods and the general economic downturn. At first she started slowly, muttering about the state of the country, Venezuela. As she gained momentum, her voice rose, and her sentences became disjointed. By the end of the impromptu interview, she was shrieking hysterically about “*Castro-comunismo*” and some conspiracy theory about President Nicolas Maduro being a Colombian Cuban spy. After a moment of two, it was just pure rage, directed at everything: the country, the government, the people – everything.

Don't get me wrong, I certainly understood her



Nicolas Maduro.

frustration. Unlike most international journalists who cover Venezuela, I actually lived in the country long-term. I lived in a *barrio*. My income was minimum wage. Inflation had eaten away my savings, making my weekly trip to the grocery store not only time-consuming but also increasingly expensive. It felt like the country was heading into crisis, and it couldn't possibly go on much longer. That was Venezuela two years ago.

People like that woman outside the supermarket blame the government's socialist ideology for the downturn. Government sympathisers often point the finger at an international conspiracy against Maduro, normally

hatched in the halls of power in Washington. In general, the two narratives are either: the USSR in the late 1980s, or Chile in the early 1970s.

Reality is comparably boring. To be sure, socialism has gone a long way towards shaping today's Venezuela, and the US government would no doubt delight in seeing one of its few regional rivals collapse. Yet in reality, Venezuela's current economic crisis can mostly be chalked up to one of life's most dreary technicalities: bad currency management.

The “inflation-depreciation spiral”

Venezuela has a fixed-rate currency, meaning the

government sets exchange rates pegged to the US dollar. It's worth noting there's nothing socialist about a fixed exchange rate. Countries as diverse as Saudi Arabia and Aruba have fixed-rate currencies. However, Venezuela's currency, the bolivar fuerte (BsF), also has one other interesting feature: its distribution is controlled by the government. In Venezuela, you can't just go to an exchange house and buy currency. You either purchase currency from the government, or you resort to the black market. A decade ago, this arrangement worked well, but today things are different.

In the second half of 2012, Venezuela began to experience unusually high inflation. By unusual, I mean unusual for the Chavez years. Under Maduro's predecessor, Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's typically high inflation was kept under control. World Bank data indicates that between 2006 and 2011, annual inflation varied between 13% and just over 30%. This may sound high, but by Venezuelan standards it's actually pretty low. The year before Chavez was first elected, 1997, annual inflation was 50%. In 1996, it was 99.9%. Compared with those figures, Chavez did pretty well.

Yet after over a decade of remaining in check, suddenly inflation began to head upwards in late 2012. This was accompanied by a collapse in the black market value of the BsF. For example, in October



Protests in Venezuela.

2012, I purchased currency on the black market for around BsF13 to the dollar. Six months later, I got around BsF20 for a dollar.

This was the beginning of what economist Mark Weisbrot has described as an “inflation-depreciation spiral”. The basic idea is that people in Venezuela saw inflation go up, so they traded some of their BsF for US dollars on the black market. From an individual perspective, this makes perfect sense to anyone hoping to protect their savings from inflation. The problem was that a lot of Venezuelans did this, which meant the value of the BsF plummeted in the black market. Since many businesses in Venezuela use the black market rate to price imported goods, the collapse in the BsF's value meant consumer goods became more expensive. This created more inflation, which spurred more Venezuelans to sell their BsF. And so Weisbrot's “spiral” became self-perpetuating.

There are a few different explanations floating around

for why this deadly cycle kicked off. Weisbrot himself has argued it was caused by the government reducing the amount of foreign currency it was selling through its official exchange mechanism, thus pushing up black market demand. Other economists have claimed the government printed too much money in 2012, which is likewise a recipe for inflation. There are other long-term factors that also made the currency more vulnerable to instability; the right wing will happily point to low domestic productivity, while the left will undoubtedly note speculation and intentional sabotage. There are elements of truth to both these arguments. Whatever the cause, the government failed to nip the currency problem in the bud. At first, this was mostly due to politics.

In the second half of 2012, the government was totally focused on the October presidential elections. Yet just two months after winning the elections by a landslide,

Chavez was hospitalised for cancer treatment. This put his then vice-president, Maduro, in charge of the government. As a caretaker, Maduro wasn't about to mess with the currency controls. When Chavez died in March 2013, the government was again thrust into election mode. Although Maduro won snap presidential elections in 2013, it was by a narrow margin of just 1.5% of the vote. At the time, observers across the political spectrum agreed Maduro only just survived because he represented the continuation of Chavez's legacy. Undoubtedly, this contributed to the Maduro administration's reluctance to make serious changes to any Chavez-era policies – including the currency exchange regime.

In December 2013, Venezuela had municipal elections scheduled – meaning the government remained in election mode until the end of the year. If the government had imposed painful currency reform in mid-2013, they may not have seen any gains until after the December elections. So, reform was again put on the backburner.

This isn't to say there were no changes to the currency exchange regime. In March 2013, the government announced the creation of Sicad, a mechanism through which the state would auction off dollars to private industry. By July, weekly Sicad auctions were being held. At these auctions, BsF was being sold at a rate of around 11 to the dollar. By this point, the black

market rate was well over BsF20=US\$1, meaning the government was hugely subsidising access to currency for industry. For every dollar the government sold industry, the government itself was losing a second dollar in its overly generous exchange rate.

This is a key piece of the puzzle as to why the inflation-depreciation spiral has become so damaging. For most governments around the world, depreciation of their currency can actually be a good thing. For one, it lowers costs, especially for governments that rely on exports for revenue, such as Venezuela. The Venezuelan state makes money by selling oil on international markets, meaning much of its income is in dollars. Yet much of the state's day-to-day expenditures are denominated in BsF (like wages). So, when the BsF drops, the government's coffers should suddenly start looking a lot better.

Unfortunately, the government has dug itself into a hole by effectively subsidising the value of the BsF through official channels. By keeping the official exchange rate stable even as the BsF plunges on the black market, the government has to pay out more to maintain the former rate. For example, as mentioned, back in 2013 the government was losing US\$1 for every US\$1 it sold through Sicad. A system like this isn't sustainable by any stretch of the imagination.

The government has dug its own grave

The problems caused by the currency mismanagement are vast. Anyone who has read about Venezuela in recent months has no doubt been treated to images of empty supermarket shelves, where even basic products like corn flour can be hard to buy. Right-wing pundits love jumping on these images and drawing parallels with the old USSR. Yet unlike in the perestroika-era USSR, this scarcity of consumer goods has little to do with low productivity. Venezuelans have been importing most of their food and other consumer products since the 1970s. This reliance on imports wasn't caused by socialist policies but by some very basic rules of the capitalist market. For decades, Venezuela has suffered from a severe case of Dutch Disease – an economic phenomenon where one extremely profitable sector thrives at the expense of other sectors of the economy. In Venezuela's case, a booming oil industry meant other sectors of the economy like agriculture have long been neglected. Generations of Venezuelans have avoided this problem by simply importing everything they need from abroad.

However, if private industry can't obtain foreign currency, then it can't import goods. This is a huge problem in an import-dependent country like Venezuela. On top of this, the discrepancy between

official and unofficial exchange rates creates its own unique phenomenon not so different from Dutch Disease. Importers are given an incentive to not actually import anything. A great example of this was a once rampant scam known as the carousel. Popular back in the late 2000s, the scam involved an importer applying for foreign currency at one of the government's preferential rates, then importing a load of the product (such as medical supplies). However, the supplies were never unloaded. Instead, they remained inside the freight truck and were again exported. Meanwhile, the importer sold their foreign currency allocation on the black market for a nice profit. The importer then applied for more foreign currency to purchase more medical supplies, and drove their freight truck across the border yet again. Under this scheme, the importer made far more money than they ever could through legitimate business activities by simply buying foreign currency cheap from the government and selling it at a higher rate on the black market.

What happens to an economy if every business simply relies on playing with exchange rates, instead of engaging in productive activities like importing, selling, constructing, manufacturing or providing any kind of service to the public? In the end, the only game in town is making money off speculation and corruption. In other words,

the government has spent an astounding amount of money to maintain a system that is devastating the economy. It makes about as much sense as responding to a burglar in your home by buying him bullets and a baseball bat.

Kicking that can down the road

When looked at in totality, a story emerges not of the USSR 2.0, or imperialist intervention crushing socialism, but of a paralysed government that kicked the can down the road a little too far. Shortly after Maduro's allies won the 2013 municipal elections, there were some signs this may change. In January 2014, Sicad was expanded. Then in February, the government created Sicad II, which was basically a resurrected version of a shelved Chavez-era bond swap programme. Since then, all kinds of supposedly revolutionary exchange systems have come and gone, leaving behind little more than a collection of creative abbreviations.

Each new mechanism was touted by the government as a silver bullet to the exchange problem. Then, when six months down the track the mechanism failed to produce results, it was replaced by something else. Nothing ever got simplified, while the overall picture simply became more and more convoluted.

For years, the government has only had two options:

either move towards a well-regulated, well-oiled, simple and loophole-free controlled exchange regime, or a free float. Instead, the government has chosen a third option: make currency exchange as convoluted, inefficient and messy as possible, with loopholes and blind spots left, right and centre. Nothing makes sense, and everything is open to exploitation. This may sound harsh, but the facts don't lie.

At first it may seem baffling as to why the government has gone down this path, but there is a crystal-clear answer. I briefly alluded to one possibility earlier: the Maduro administration doesn't want to look like it's betraying the legacy of Chavez. Part of the problem is also likely corruption. With so many people both in and out of government profiting off the dysfunctional exchange system, there is probably significant pressure on the state to maintain the status quo.

However, these explanations pale in comparison with what I believe is the core problem. Since 2013, the government's economics team has been in a state of chaos. With the exception of a calm period in 2015, there have been major reshuffles every few months. I refer to this as "musical ministries" not only because of the constant state of movement, but also because there's a lot of superficial movement but no substantive changes.

Contrasts with the Chavez era

Since late 2012, Venezuela has had a government incapable of making tough economic decisions. This contrasts sharply with the Chavez era, when the government was willing to make dramatic moves to reshape the economy. From the 2002-03 oil lockouts to the 2008 currency overhaul, the Chavez administration made a lot of tough calls – many of which weren't particularly popular in the short term. Meanwhile, the Maduro government has no unique or credible economic policies to its name.

Necessary reforms have gone neglected, and the results have been disastrous. When Chavez was elected in 1998, half of Venezuelans lived in poverty. By 2012, World Bank data shows that figure had dropped to 25%, meaning poverty literally halved under Chavez. As previously mentioned, Venezuela's notorious inflation rate was likewise kept in check in the Chavez years. In 2012, inflation was 21.1%. Gross domestic product (GDP) wasn't much different. In 1998, annual GDP growth was at 0.3%, indicating Venezuela's economy was pretty much dead in the water. In 2012, Venezuela's annual GDP growth was 5.6%. Venezuela did pretty well under Chavez.

However, after 2012, everything changed. Inflation surged, economic growth collapsed, and poverty made a

comeback. In 2013, poverty surged to 31%, and independent estimates suggest it's now even higher. Data from Venezuela's central bank shows GDP contracted by 5.7% in 2015, while inflation was far above 100%. The data of Venezuela's GDP at purchasing power parity per capita is revealing. This is one of the best measurements around for determining how well living standards are improving. With the exception of a sharp dip after the 2008 recession, it's easy to see that Venezuelans saw dramatic improvements to their living standards through much of the Chavez era. Then, around 2012, things started to reverse.

In other words, this isn't a story of steady decline under the socialist governments of Chavez and Maduro. Rather, the data depicts a country doing well through to 2012. Then after 2012, everything took a turn for the worse. By highlighting this, I don't mean to place all the blame on the Maduro administration while depicting the Chavez years as a paradise (an attitude some disillusioned Chavistas have slipped into). As I'll explain in a moment, the seeds of the current crisis were sown under Chavez. Nonetheless, there is a clear difference in governance style between Chavez and Maduro that often goes unremarked upon. Just how much this difference contributed to the crisis is debatable, and perhaps Venezuela wouldn't be faring much better if Chavez was

alive. Personally though, I suspect Chavez would have done a better job ensuring reform happened.

Long-term factors

In either case, although 2012 was the year the flawed monetary policy began seriously impacting the economy, it's worth noting other long-term problems had already become apparent years earlier. These other problems played key roles in setting the scene for the current crisis and making the BsF so susceptible to collapse. At the heart of everything lies the failure of consecutive governments to wean the economy off oil. Chavez himself recognised the potentially devastating impacts of Dutch Disease, and made serious efforts between 2003 and 2008 to diversify the economy. The results of these efforts speak for themselves in the data.

Until 2008, agriculture and industry such as manufacturing were becoming increasingly important in the Venezuelan economy. This indicates the government was actually making some progress in its stated aim of diversification. However, this ended around 2008, presumably due to the impacts of the global financial crisis. Since 2008, Venezuela's economy has slipped back into its old ways. Data from Venezuela's national statistics agency suggests the value of food imports roughly tripled between 2008 and 2014.

Looking more generally at all goods and services imports as a percentage of GDP, we likewise see a pretty dramatic upwards trend just a few years after the global financial crisis (starting in 2010).

Part of the explanation for this is actually quite positive. The Chavez years were characterised mostly by rising consumption, including of imported goods. For example, in the 1990s, a bottle of decent Chilean wine was beyond the grasp of anyone outside the business elite. Yet even until late 2013, I could afford to splurge on a bottle a few times a year, while still making ends meet on minimum wage. The looming problem was that domestic productivity didn't keep up with rising consumer demand, especially after 2008. In the short term, this was likely seen as a small price to pay for the massive poverty alleviation under Chavez. This was epitomised in a now famous Chavista response to an opposition activist complaining of milk scarcity. The Chavista said there was no milk on the supermarket shelves because "it's in the bellies of the poor". Where milk was once reserved for the rich, it had become something everyone could afford; even if there wasn't quite enough to go around.

Today though, we again have an economy dependent on imports, but where the devalued currency makes imports like wine prohibitively expensive. Domestic non-oil productivity has remained

dismal, making consumer products like milk harder than ever to find. All the while, the economy is more dependent on petrodollars than ever.

When the price of oil slumped, it was therefore inevitable that Venezuelans would see a downturn. Indeed, in some ways, the current crisis isn't anything new: Venezuela has experienced boom-and-bust cycles coinciding with oil prices since the 1970s. With historically high oil prices, Chavez had luck on his side during his golden years, while Maduro has drawn a short straw. However, it's worth noting that no other petro-state in the world is facing the same kind of crisis that has hit Venezuela.

Bad luck aside, the Maduro administration could have avoided the current conditions by reforming monetary policy in 2013 or 2014. While low productivity and anti-government sabotage are issues that can't be resolved overnight, monetary policy could have been shored up in a relatively short period of time. The Maduro administration had meaningful agency here, but failed to act. If serious reforms had been enacted, Venezuela would still be facing a nasty downturn, but probably not a fully fledged economic and political crisis.

Some hard truths

No matter how we cut it, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that poor currency management was a pivotal factor in the

current crisis. This, in turn, was the result of a government locked in procrastination and disarray, unable to look beyond short-term political necessity.

The right wing can blame it on the vague spectre of socialism, but only if they ignore the successes of the Chavez years. They also need to ignore the fact that throughout the Maduro administration, many of the government's top economics decision makers have been from the pro-business wing of the ruling PSUV party.

Likewise, the left wing can continue simply blaming the imperialist conspiracy, but they have to ignore the fact the government has made some very obvious missteps.

Assuming there is a conspiracy involving the US to crush the Bolivarian movement, the Maduro administration has made life pretty easy for the conspirators.

Unfortunately, through procrastination and inaction, poor monetary policy has been permitted to rot the foundations of the economy for years on end, and now a political crisis rages on with no end in sight. The only question left is, can this go on much longer?

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Is North Korea socialist?

Choo Chon Kai

NORTH Korea has been in the news again recently with its high-profile nuclear and missile development programmes and the US' decision to install the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defence) missile defence system in South Korea. Why is the Korean Peninsula perpetually in a state of tension? Is North Korea under Kim Jong-un “socialist”? To answer these questions, we have to first look to the past.



Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un.

The struggle against foreign domination

The people of Korea have a long and eventful history of standing up to foreign domination. The Chinese, Japanese, US and several European powers have attempted to dominate Korean society over the past 200 years, to varying degrees of success. Many Koreans view the current North-South tensions as arising from continued attempts by powerful foreign nations to subjugate Korea.

Japan attempted to subjugate Korea as early as 1592, but this was ward off by the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897) with the help of China.

The Joseon Dynasty implemented a closed-door policy and discouraged trade relations with the outside world. However, in 1636, the Manchu Qing administration in China forced Korea to acknowledge its vassal status vis-à-vis China and agree to the payment of regular tributes to the Qing rulers. In 1866, the French tried but failed to subjugate Korea. In 1871, the US used naval might to try and open Korea to US trade, but the Koreans held firm. The British occupied Geomun Island just south of the Korean Peninsula from 1885 till 1887.

Japan, which had begun modernising rapidly under the Meiji regime, managed to open

Korean ports to Japanese products in 1876. Japan's growing influence in the region led to the first war with China in 1894-95, in which Japan emerged as the victor. In 1904-05, Japan took on Russia, which also had imperial designs in Northeast Asia, and convincingly defeated the Russian navy at Port Arthur. The Eulsa Treaty between Japan and Korea in 1905 rendered Korea a “protectorate” of Japan. In 1910, Japan annexed Korea and administered it like a colony to provide food and raw materials for Japan.

The Japanese colonisation sparked much opposition in Korea, culminating in the 1

May 1919 mass demonstrations. But this was harshly put down by the Japanese authorities.

The Korean Communist Party

Korean anti-colonial activists, inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in Russia, formed the Korean Communist Party in 1925. As the Japanese had banned the setting up of communist parties, this had to be done in a clandestine manner.

Fierce opposition on the part of the Japanese led to the Korean Communist Party taking up arms and, later, to the setting up of safe bases in Manchuria, China. However, the relief from Japanese oppression for the thousands of Korean refugees who fled to Manchuria was shortlived as Japan set up a puppet state, Manchukuo (1934-45), with the help of descendants of the Qing Dynasty to administer Manchuria.

The Korean struggle for national self-determination continued both in Korea and in Manchuria. Kim Il-sung was one of the prominent leaders of the anti-Japanese struggle in Manchuria, and he received the open support of the USSR once the latter entered World War II. In August 1945 the Soviet Red Army moved into Manchuria; Kim Il-sung's guerrilla army



The Korean Peninsula.

went along with them as they entered the Korean Peninsula.

The formation of North Korea

Fearing a communist takeover of the whole Korean Peninsula, the US then decided to move to partition Korea along the 38th parallel. The Soviets agreed to the partition in the belief that, as in the case of Vietnam, this would be a temporary wartime measure. However, the US had other ideas. After deploying its troops, the US soon took control of the South and installed an administration headed by the Japanese collaborator Syngman Rhee. In 1948, this became the Republic of Korea.

In the North, the People's Democratic Republic was

proclaimed, also in 1948, with Kim Il-sung as the supreme leader. The only difference was that Soviet military forces withdrew from North Korea soon after, whereas the US continued to maintain a strong military presence in South Korea.

The Kim Il-sung regime was, on paper, a multi-party government. But in reality, the Chongdois Chongu Party, the Democratic Socialist Party and others were merely decorative ornaments to the regime. Real power was concentrated in the

Korean Communist Party (which later transformed itself into the Korean Workers' Party), within which Kim Il-sung consolidated his position, removing everyone who might want to challenge his pre-eminence. The promotion of Kim Il-sung as the "Great Leader" began during this period, and many statues were made in his likeness.

Although the North Korean regime was a repressive dictatorship, the Korean Communist Party still had widespread support in the South. The US tried to exterminate it by banning it and arresting its cadres, but the influence of the party continued to spread. Hundreds of thousands of South Koreans were either members or supporters of the Korean Communist Party.

The Korean War

The Korean Communist Party in South Korea was agitating for unification of the country. Many people in the South were unhappy with the leaders in the Syngman Rhee regime who had been collaborators with the Japanese before 1945. There were numerous armed attacks against the US military and pro-Japanese Korean landlords. The situation was fast deteriorating and developing into a full-blown civil war with thousands being killed. To add to the tension, Syngman Rhee began launching cross-border attacks.

It was in this context that Kim Il-sung, who had been building up the North Korean army with generous aid from the USSR, decided in 1950 to launch a full-scale attack across the border to unify Korea. They were aided by a massive uprising of South Koreans who wanted to be rid of Syngman Rhee, his regime and US occupation. Many South Korean soldiers deserted to the invading army from the North. The US forces were driven out of Seoul and down to Bosun on the southern end of the Korean Peninsula.

The US under President Harry Truman was not prepared to allow Korean reunification although it was clear that the majority of the people of Korea wished it. The US organised a huge counter-attack with amphibious landings at Inchon. All this was done under the flag of the United Nations, after it

managed to secure the sanction of the world body through a legally dubious process.

The US-led attack involved heavy bombing including the widespread use of napalm on the North. Towns in the North were levelled and civilian casualties numbered in the tens of thousands. The US forces gained the upper hand and, after driving the invaders back, pushed further on into the North.

As US troops pushed deeper into North Korea and approached the Yalu River, which marked the border with China, the Chinese became alarmed. Despite warnings, the US troops continued their drive. It was at this stage in 1951 that China entered the war. A Chinese “voluntary military force” poured into North Korea to fight alongside the North Korean regime. The tide of war changed again, but with tremendous loss of lives especially among the Chinese “volunteers”. The US forces were pushed back to the former border between North and South. Finally, a ceasefire was agreed to in 1953.

The Koreas after the war

North Korea was badly devastated in the war. However, it still achieved a higher rate of economic growth from 1955 till the 1970s compared with South Korea, which was beset by political instability and economic crises. Interestingly, the per capita income of the population of North Korea was better than that of the South in 1970

despite the fact it was shunned by the Western powers and had to tread very carefully because of the tensions between the USSR and China.

However, the economic development of South Korea overtook that of the North in the 1980s. South Korea was helped by the fact that the US wanted to showcase it as a success story compared with the communist North. South Korea was able to use US aid, Japanese direct investment, the low wages of its workers and the huge export markets of the US and Europe to build its industry – steelworks, shipbuilding, automobiles, consumer electrical goods (fans, refrigerators, air conditioners etc). South Korea’s industrial capacity and gross domestic product (GDP) expanded at an augmented rate such that it is considered one of the Asian “tiger” economies.

In North Korea, the incorporation of modern technology was severely limited by the country’s isolated status and the economic problems that the USSR was facing in the 1980s. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the resulting loss of subsidised petroleum products impacted badly on the North Korean economy; electricity generation and thus industrial output were affected, as was fertiliser production. Floods followed by drought in the period 1995-96 wrought havoc on food supplies, resulting in severe shortages. It is estimated that between 200,000 and 3 million people died of starvation between 1996 and



North Korean missile programme.

1999.

North Korea accelerated its nuclear programme in the mid-1990s. It also began selling weapons abroad at about that time. Although guided missiles made in North Korea aren't "state-of-the-art" weapons, their much lower costs make them popular with countries that are not in the good books of the US and Israel. In fact, North Korea is now one of the major exporters of guided missiles.

North Korea's weapons development programme has made the US and other Western powers uneasy.

Juche, Songun and the leadership cult

In 1955, Kim Il-sung and his supporters presented "Juche" as the founding ideology of the country. The main principles of Juche are self-reliance, national independence and caution with regard to international trade. Initially Juche was presented as an extension of Marxism modified to meet the needs of the Korean people. However, since the 1970s, it has been presented as

an alternative ideology which is superior to Marxism.

Kim Il-sung ruled North Korea from its inception up to his death in 1994. He was replaced by his son, Kim Jong-il, who took the leadership cult to extreme levels. Kim Jong-il inherited a nation with severe economic problems. His response was to rely on the military. He tweaked the Juche concept to include the idea that the armed forces, not the workers, were the revolutionary force in Korea; as such, the national surplus should be channelled to the military for it to manage. This ideology is termed "Songun".

After Kim Jong-il's death in 2011, the reins were passed to his son Kim Jong-un, who has continued relying on brutal tactics and the leadership cult apparatus to stay in power.

Is North Korea socialist?

The North Korean leadership insists that it is socialist, and quite a few Western commentators are happy to use that term to describe North Korea. It is true there are no capitalists in North

Korea and production is not driven by the profit maximisation principle. However, social-ism entails more than just that.

The workers in North Korea are not in control of the factories or fields that they work in. They do not determine how the surplus that they produce is deployed. There is no local democracy. Power is concentrated in the hands of a small clique of bureaucrats around the paramount ruler, who can (and does) eliminate some among them from time to time. These mandarins who are close to power have to watch their backs and exercise great caution so as not to excite the suspicion or disfavour of the all-powerful leader.

The best description of North Korea is that it is a deformed workers' state with a xenophobic national ideology, ruled tightly by the authoritarian Kim dynasty. It cannot be termed socialist because empowerment – both economic and political – of ordinary workers and small farmers is an integral part of the socialist vision.

Militarisation and the continuing tension in Northeast Asia is a consequence of big-power rivalry in the aftermath of World War II. Sadly, this has set back yet again the Korean people's centuries-long struggle for self-determination.

Choo Chon Kai is a member of the PSM Central Committee.

17 April 2017

Prospects of change in PRU 14

D. Jeyakumar

THERE is widespread disaffection with Barisan Nasional. In the 13th general election (PRU 13) in 2013, the strong support for BN in the rural seats in the Peninsula and in East Malaysia helped it hold on to power. Today, rural Malay support for BN is dropping. The rural population is quite fed up with rising prices, the GST, the high level of corruption in the government, the luxurious lifestyle of Umno leaders and the ongoing 1MDB scandal. However, because of the split in the opposition coalition, BN will probably do better in the coming elections than it did in PRU 13.

The PAS factor

PAS stood in 67 parliamentary seats in West Malaysia in PRU 13 and won in 24 of these. See the table on the next page for a breakdown of PAS' performance in parliamentary constituencies with more than 50% Malay voters.

The fact that PAS did not win any of the seats with more than 80% Malay majority in Kedah is clear evidence that Malay support for PAS must be below 50% in rural Kedah.



YB Darell Leiking. Dr Mahathir.

Support for PAS among rural Malays was even lower in Penang and Johor. PAS victories in the west coast states were dependent on a huge swing of non-Malay support towards PAS as it was a member of Pakatan Rakyat at that time. The figures indicate that PAS only managed to get support from more than 50% of Malay voters in some constituencies in Kelantan and Terengganu. It is unlikely that PAS is going to get much support from non-Malays in PRU 14. Without non-Malay support, PAS is going to suffer losses in 10-12 parliamentary seats that it won in PRU 13, even if there are no three-cornered fights in the seats it contests.

Many of the seats that PAS won in the west coast states could be won in a one-to-one contest between Umno and either PKR, Amanah or Bersatu as the latter three parties would be able to appeal to both Malays and non-Malays disgruntled with BN. But at this point in time it appears unlikely that PAS is going to step down from any of these seats to give other opposition parties the chance to take on Umno one on one.

PKR

In PRU 13, PKR stood in 47 parliamentary constituencies in Peninsular Malaysia where more than 50% of the voters were Malay. The table on p. 68 shows its performance.

UMNO vs PAS in Malay-majority parliamentary seats in Peninsular Malaysia, PRU 13					
Percentage of Malay voters	> 90%	81-90%	71-80%	61-70%	51-60%
Perlis		3:0			
Kedah	3:0 ^a	3:0	1:1		
Kelantan	2:8 ^b	0:1			
Terengganu	2:4	0:1			
Penang			2:0		
Perak	1:0	2:0		3:2	
Pahang		4:0	1:0	0:1	
Selangor			1:0	2:1	0:2
Fed. Territory	1:0			1:0	
N. Sembilan			1:0	1:0	1:0
Melaka		1:0		1:0	1:0
Johor		1:0	3:0	1:0	0:3

a. Umno defeated PAS in three of the parliamentary seats in Kedah that had more than 90% Malay majority.

b. PAS defeated UMNO in 8 out of the 10 seats in Kelantan in which Malays made up more than 90% of the voters.

PKR did win 17 out of the 47 Malay-majority seats that it contested. But this fact masks the reality that PKR does not have an effective electoral machinery in the rural areas. It is quite dependent on PAS for the rural Malay vote. If PAS president Hadi Awang gives an order that PAS should not work with any other party unless approved by PAS central command (and this is quite probable), then PKR will be quite hamstrung and will have to struggle to get the rural votes. But given the high level of rural Malay voter disaffection with BN, PKR might still manage to increase its tally of parliamentary seats if three-cornered battles with PAS can be avoided.

This fact is understood by the PKR faction aligned to Azmin Ali and they are trying

to keep PAS as a “friend”. However, the PKR faction around Rafizi Ramli have a different position – they believe that support for PAS is dropping, and that PKR and Amanah can win in three-cornered electoral contests in many rural seats. (Several DAP leaders also support this position.) This faction, and several Amanah leaders notably Khalid Samad, therefore take a rather abrasive stance towards PAS, and they are open to putting up candidates against PAS in some of the seats that PAS contested in PRU 13. That is likely to trigger a tit-for-tat situation where PAS puts up candidates against PKR candidates in seats that PKR contested in PRU 13. That would bring smiles of relief to Najib and other senior BN leaders!

In PSM’s assessment, PAS has the solid support of 15-30% of the rural Malay vote. That fact, combined with the fact that neither PKR nor Amanah has developed an electoral machinery in the rural areas, means that it would be suicidal for PKR and Amanah to attempt to take on PAS in three-cornered fights.

Prospects for Sabah

Here, there is good news for the opposition. Shafie Apdal is an intelligent and shrewd politician who is quite popular in his home state. He speaks eloquently and has a good grasp of major national issues. He could even be a candidate for “Prime Minister”! Having been a senior Umno leader, he probably has a sufficiently

PKR performance in Malay-majority parliamentary seats					
% of Malay voters	> 90%	81-90%	71-80%	61-70%	51-60%
BN won	5	4	5	9	7
PKR won	0	0	3	4	10

large “war chest” to finance his political activities! It is quite possible that he can prise a significant portion of the rural Muslim vote in Sabah away from Umno. Meanwhile Darell Leiking is quite popular in the Kadazandusun community. Many Sabahans harbour an anti-Semenanjung resentment relating to royalty payments, the immigration problem and the slow pace of promotions of Sabahans to senior positions in the government machinery. On top of that, there are serious misgivings over the Umno-PAS moves to Islamicise the country.

It is quite possible that there will be a swing of voters to the opposition in Sabah. At present only three out of the 25 parliamentary seats in Sabah are in opposition hands. With some smart deal-making, that number could be increased to 12. But this can be sabotaged by PH if it insists on holding on to the majority of the seats it contested in PRU 13. If Pakatan Harapan can conclude an electoral pact with Barisan Wawasan, then the opposition can make significant gains in Sabah. Here the ball is in the PH’s court, but can the faction-ridden PH rise to the occasion?

Sarawak, on the other hand, will probably remain a BN vote bank in PRU 14.

So, my rough projection is: 89 - A + B would be the number of seats that the opposition coalition will get in PRU 14. “A” are the seats that PAS will probably lose to Umno while “B” are the seats that Warisan will win from Umno in Sabah. My guess is: A = 12 and B = 9. But this is based on the best-case scenario where Pakatan Harapan plays smart, does not aggravate the spat with PAS, and keeps three-cornered contests to a minimum.

Pakatan Harapan and PSM

PSM formally applied to join Pakatan Rakyat (PR) in 2012. That was a very controversial decision that led to serious internal arguments. But we managed to contain the disagreements by holding several consensus-building

discussion sessions. However, PR did not respond to our offer to join, apart from asking if we supported the PR manifesto (to which question we said we did). Then came the debacle of PRU 13 where three out of our four candidates faced three-cornered contests with PR component parties, despite the fact that we had always said that we would work with PR to bring down BN. The table below summarises our results in PRU 13.

The situation has not improved. When PR broke up and Pakatan Harapan (PH) was formed, PSM was not consulted nor invited. At the announcement of this new coalition, when asked by some NGO activists and the press why PSM was not present, some senior PH leaders mumbled something about PSM rejecting Article 153 of the Federal Constitution. This

PSM’s performance in PRU 13			
	BN	PSM candidate	3rd party
Jelapang (PSM logo)	4,655	2,568	16,921 (DAP)
Semenyih (PSM logo)	17,616	5,568	13,471 (PKR)
Kota Damansara (PKR logo)	16,387	14,860	7,312 (PAS)
Sg Siput (PKR logo)	18,800	21,563	197 (Ind)

is not true – we uphold affirmative action for disadvantaged groups. (My debate of the Royal Address in Parliament in March 2010 would give an idea of the stand PSM has taken on Article 153. It is carried as Chapter 22 in my book *Visi Alternatif untuk Malaysia*.)

To be frank, joining PH as a formal member would be problematic for us at this stage. It would be difficult to sell the idea to our quite vocal rank and file after the experience we went through in 2012-13. Also, joining PH would imply an endorsement of several of the shortcomings of the PR and PH governments, including:

- The failure of PR to make any progress on the issue of local council elections.
- The neoliberal policy position of PR and PH, for example:
 - The enthusiastic promotion of health tourism by the Penang and Selangor state governments;
 - The tacit approval of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) among several DAP and PKR national leaders;
 - Their use of statistics on foreign direct investment (FDI) to underline their success in managing the state;
 - Lim Guan Eng’s repeated arguments that the minimum wage should not apply to foreign workers;
 - The close association of several national PR leaders with IDEAS, an



Mat Nor Ayat and Suresh Kumar for DUN Jelai and Parlimen Camerons.

- ultra-right pro-market group;
- etc.
 - Money politics, especially within PKR. This arises from the manner in which the PKR national leadership is selected. This also encourages factionalism. Each faction needs several million ringgit every three years for this leadership tussle.
 - High level of graft within the local councils in Selangor.
 - Lack of meaningful consultation within PR. This is one of the factors that led to the breakaway of PAS.
 - Failure to come up with an analysis of persistent rural poverty and a comprehensive policy package to overcome this.
 - Overreliance on political stunts like the September 2008 crossover, the Kajang move, the vilification of Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim.

But despite all this, PSM is committed to bringing down BN, which we think is too corrupt and racist to be reformed or rehabilitated. So we are prepared to work with PH to avoid three-cornered contests.

PSM has identified 20 credible candidates for PRU 14. By “credible”, we mean candidates who have a track record in the constituencies that they would contest in. However, in the interest of attaining one-to-one contests with BN, PSM would be prepared to compromise on a substantial number of seats if PH agrees to let PSM stand one-on-one with the BN in the remainder. But the current PH position that PSM can only “pinjam” Sg Siput, and that too only if I stand, is not something that PSM can agree to. (Civil society groups who want to see one-to-one contests should

speak to the PH leaders and ask them to accommodate PSM and not push us into a position where we have to, if we wish to survive as an electoral party, fight back.)

Our conception: PSM – the party of the future

When we formed PSM 20 years ago, our main aim was to utilise the socialist vision to project an alternative path of development for Malaysia. We have chosen to do this not by elevating the Marxist classics to the status of scripture and spending a lot of time debating them, but by going to the ground to listen to the problems faced by ordinary people and developing both analyses and policies from this contact with the grassroots.

In the course of our involvement with the people, we have developed a set of policy positions that are interconnected and based on the understanding that many of our economic problems are due to the subordinate position of countries like Malaysia in the global supply chain. The persistent poverty of some of our sectors is due to imperialism!

Some of the policy positions that we are advocating are:

- The distribution of national income to the poorer 60% of society should be both by increasing the minimum wage in stages and by strengthening the social protective net.

- Improving the social

protective net should include:

- subsidised good-quality healthcare for all. This would require a freeze on the expansion of private health facilities because these undermine the public system by enticing away staff and specialists.

- free education up to college level.

- subsidised housing (one house per family).

- universal old age pension after the age of 70 years.

- a retrenchment fund.

- Working within the ASEAN framework to stop the “race to the bottom” where ASEAN countries compete with each other to win FDI by progressively reducing corporate tax and squeezing the labour force. We call for the reworking of the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement to use tariff sanctions to enforce a 1-percentage-point increase in corporate taxes annually until all countries reach a tax bracket of 35%. ASEAN would have to lobby other trade blocs in the Third World to implement similar agreements.

- Democratising society:
 - local council elections.
 - referendums to discuss important national issues, e.g., nuclear power for Malaysia.

- policy that 30% of the directors in all government-linked companies (GLCs) be chosen by the people through national elect-

ions for three-year terms.

The directors so selected will be required to declare their assets annually, and to step down after a maximum of two terms.

- Decarbonising society:
 - stop new coal-fired plants for generating electricity.

- decommission the most polluting coal and gas plants in stages.

- use solar panels in all the dams that now generate hydroelectric power.

- mandate installation of solar panels on all government and GLC buildings.

- spend more money on non-polluting sources of power generation such as solar, wind, tidal, etc.

- Public funding of political parties in a manner that is equitable. Putting caps on the amount of donations a party can receive from corporate sponsors.

We want to enunciate a vision of a future that can excite the imagination of young people and build a political movement that is genuinely democratic and that leads to a high level of political consciousness among the ordinary citizens. Participating in elections and winning some seats is one of the ways we can use to enunciate this vision.

The above is the text of a paper presented at a Kawan Karib Seminar in Ipoh on 14 May 2017.

The 2017 UK elections – lessons for the Left

D. Jeyakumar

THE UK general election on 8 June 2017 has plunged Britain into a period of political uncertainty. Prime Minister Theresa May thought that her Conservative Party would win by a landslide and dispatch the Labour Party to political oblivion. To the amazement of many, Labour not only survived but gained 31 seats to 262, while the Conservatives lost 13 seats, slumping to 317 and losing their majority in parliament.

What lessons can the Left learn from the UK elections?

The most obvious is that sometimes the political establishment grossly misjudges the mood of the populace. The Conservative Party leadership obviously believed the mainstream media who were predicting that Labour would be crushed if it contested a general election with Jeremy Corbyn as the party leader. This was why May called the elections three years before she had to – to smash Labour and cement the dominance of the



Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the Labour Party.

Conservatives. How far off the mark they were!

Interestingly, the majority of Labour MPs also concurred with the assessment of mainstream political commentators in the UK that Corbyn would lead Labour to disaster and fare even worse than in the general elections of 2010 and 2015, when Labour won 258 and 232 seats respectively in the 650-seat House of Commons. In June 2016, Labour MPs launched a rebellion and passed a vote of no confidence in Corbyn by 172 votes to 40. This triggered a contest for the leadership of the Labour Party. However, in the voting in September 2016, Corbyn again won the leadership campaign, this time

with 61.8% of the vote, a 2-percentage-point increase on his September 2015 victory.

Che Guevara is reported to have said, “Be realistic and do the impossible!” Through believing in the relevance of their message and in refusing to accept the political establishment’s verdict that their quest was an impossible one, the team around Corbyn has opened new possibilities for Britain!

The second lesson that we should derive is that clear and consistent policy positions can be “sexy”! Many politicians and their advisers, including those in Malaysia, think that the general public can be won over only by either playing on their apprehensions

or promising them some direct benefits – that the electorate are not too intelligent and can be won over by sweet talk and stunts. But what we witnessed in the British elections was a massive and enthusiastic buy-in by millions of voters who had grown weary of austerity and cutbacks on social services. The Labour manifesto, with its clear commitment to increasing funding for healthcare and housing, free tuition up to university level, social services for the elderly, renationalisation of the railways – policy positions based on enhancing solidarity and redistributing wealth in society – galvanised a significant portion of the British population. It reignited hope and led to a huge increase in popular participation in the electoral process. And the momentum generated by this electoral campaign will carry over to the next general election, which cannot be too far off!

Cenk Uygun of *The Young Turks*, an online news show based in the US, has been arguing that a majority of citizens in advanced countries are utterly fed up with the political establishments in their own countries which have over the past 30 years rolled back the welfare net and undermined social solidarity in the interest of balancing the budget. According to Uygun, a significant portion of the people will now support an anti-establishment populist,



Indignado movement in Spain.

whether he/she be from the right or from the left of the political spectrum. So the choice is between Trump and Sanders! Incidentally, Uygun predicted about eight months ago that Corbyn would win in the next UK elections. The revolt against the status quo is underway – the parties with a clear alternative will stand to gain from this rejection of mainstream policies. That would be the third lesson that we should derive from the UK elections.

Another issue that the Left needs to look at carefully is that some of the mud thrown at it over the past 50 years still sticks in the minds of people. Many of those who did not vote for Labour in this election perceived Corbyn as an apologist for “extremist” groups such as the IRA and Hamas, and as being “soft” on security. They felt that the unilateral nuclear disarmament that he has been advocating will make the world more insecure, that the higher taxes that he is proposing will lead to capital flight and economic

recession, and that his more conciliatory stance towards Muslim immigrants will open the UK to more immigration and to terrorist attacks.

These issues were brought up by the British media again and again in the interviews it had with Corbyn, and these are the issues that Corbyn’s Labour will have to clarify to the British public, and fairly quickly, if it wishes to win a majority in the next general elections. Similarly, the Left in Malaysia will be challenged to clarify our position on multi-party parliamentary democracy, private ownership of businesses, international trade, authoritarianism and religion. These are legitimate questions to ask of a political movement that aspires to take over the reins of government! And we have to be prepared.

Thatcher’s war cry that “there is no alternative” to going along with policies that favour investors and the large corporations has shaped public policy all over the world for the past three decades. Wages have

been kept down, social security slashed, essential services privatised and tax rates for the richest reduced drastically, all in the name of growing the national economy. The world economy has grown, but so too has income disparity. Labour's success under Corbyn is another indicator that the pendulum is now swinging in the opposite direction. People all over the world are tired of the centre-Right and the centre-Left, which both implement the same pro-corporate agenda with minimal adjustments. People want a fairer new deal. It is now possible for progressive parties to win elections and form governments.

But after that, what? Can we deliver the goods? The world economy has become increasingly integrated. We are enmeshed in a system where international laws allow big corporations and super-rich individuals to outsource production to low-wage countries and use multiple loopholes to transfer their profits/earnings to tax havens. There is some "wriggle room" for national governments, but the constraints created by the pro-corporate rules governing the global economy are real. Disengagement from the global economy isn't a practical option – it would cause too much economic disruption, unemployment and a sudden drop in people's well-being.

There are many who were disappointed that the ruling Syriza party in Greece bowed to the demands of the



Bandung Conference 1955.

EU and themselves implemented austerity measures that they had campaigned so strongly against. Several people on the Left accuse Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras of "selling out". That's an easy, and lazy, position – attribute the blame to the personal weakness of a leader. Then you do not have to deal with the more difficult issue of real-life constraints arising from the structure of the global economy!

We need strategies to steer our countries out of the predicament that the neoliberal world order has trapped them in. We may have to challenge certain global rules regarding international finance, intellectual property rights, investor rights and trade. We may have to build alternative trading blocs. We may need to rekindle the aspirations of Bandung 1955* but with a 21st-century flavour. We need to think of pathways towards realising the mandate that we wish to win from our people. All this means we on the Left have to seriously reflect on the question: After

winning, then what?

We can learn a lot from the experiences of Chile under Allende, Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia and Greece to understand the problems that the Left might have to deal with after securing electoral victory. We have to learn from their experiences so that we can avoid making costly mistakes. Winning elections is just the first step in the journey to a society based on solidarity. It is an important and not-easy-to-achieve step, but it doesn't represent the end of the struggle. We need to start preparing our movements for the road that lies beyond the successful completion of this first step even as we build our forces for carrying out step one.

19 June 2017

Note

* A historic conference of African and Asian states was held in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955 to forge greater cooperation in the developing world, oppose colonialism and work towards a more equitable international order.

Book review: Empowering the people

Mohd Zaidi b. Musa



Publisher: PSM Centre
2016



Dr. Nasir Hashim.

DR Nasir Hashim ought to be congratulated for bringing this, his seventh book, to print. Although Dr Nasir has just turned 70, he still hasn't come out with his memoirs. I was thus driven to acquire a copy of this book to glean some lessons from his rich experience.

Some might think that, weighing in at 500 pages, this book might be too long for the current generation who are used to instant information from Google. But when one opens this book, one sees that its contents are distilled from

the writer's life experiences of trying to build a socialist movement in this country. As Dr Nasir says in the poem at the beginning of the book, the journey towards socialism is a long process. Definitely not one that can be condensed into a hundred pages.

There has to be the appropriate balance between theory and practice in any struggle. This fusion of theory and practice is praxis. In addition, we have to learn from the efforts and experiences of the socialists who preceded us in the struggle. Their victories

and their shortcomings should act as a guide for us in developing the struggle appropriately in our day and time. As the writer points out, the class structure of Malaysian society has evolved over time, but the oppression of the poor remains constant. What has changed is the form of oppression, but the overriding goal of profit maximisation is the same. To illustrate this point, the writer analyses the interplay between employers, general practitioners and pharmacies to show how the profit principle has subtly permeated and changed



On the ground: Dr. Nasir with then PSM Secretary-General S. Arutchelvan.

the character of healthcare delivery in Malaysia.

The writer's analysis of issues goes much deeper than simply presenting them in terms of the conflict between workers and capitalists. He traces the wider ramifications of poverty – how an inadequate income puts stress on relationships within the family and in society, and how this leads to several of the social ills that Malaysians often lament. The writer's panoramic view links low wages and poverty to the creation of dysfunctional families, which in turns leads to delinquent behaviour among some of the youth.

The writer is insistent that we should be clear about the underlying causes of the problems that we face and not merely focus on their manifestations, like many tend to do. There are also those who believe that such problems are part of the human condition, while there are the religious clerics who reinforce the belief

that the underlying problems are a given and cannot be addressed.

The writer argues that just as slave societies transformed into feudal societies which then underwent capitalist transformation and now to neoliberalism, the existing system is in no way the "normal state" for humankind. Change is the only constant. Even though race and religion are being invoked to prevent the disenfranchised from coming together to move society forward, change cannot be held back forever. In presenting these arguments, the writer draws on events in Malaysia's recent past, such as the 1979 MAS crisis and the 1993 constitutional crisis, to illustrate his points.

The writer also believes that spirituality is an integral part of the socialist struggle as it complements the economic analysis and fills a void that would otherwise exist within the movement. He argues that

there is a dialectical relationship between man's material needs and his spirituality, between human society and nature, and between one's life as an individual and the struggle towards socialism. It is up to us to find the right balance of the yin and the yang in all these intersecting spheres of our lives. These analyses are interspersed with charts that help the reader understand the dialectical relationships that we are immersed in. The author also discusses how the national capitalists and

the multi-national corporations conspire to create a culture of dependency so that the people will remain shackled by feelings of inferiority and despair.

In his foreword, Dr Abdul Halim Ali (retired professor from UKM) recounts how many leftists gave up hope in a socialist alternative at the end of the 1980s. It is clear that Dr Nasir was not among them. While others were becoming disillusioned and defeatist, he soldiered on, went to the ground, learned from the people and developed methods of working in the difficult terrain that multi-ethnic Malaysia presents. This book is a distillation of the lessons learned through long years of walking with the underprivileged, and it will be of immense help to the younger people who wish to walk in the same direction.

Mohd Zaidi Musa is a PSM member from Kelantan.

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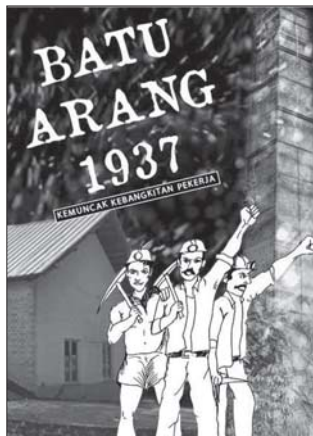


Memperkasakan Rakyat - Analisis & Perjuangan

Author: Dr. Nasir Hashim
Language: Malay
No. of Pages: 562
Price: RM 50

Praksis; gabungan antara teori dan praktik tak dapat dipisahkan serta perlu keseimbangan dalam perjuangan. Membaca kisah perjuangan yang lalu adalah membaca sejarah. Sejarah perjuangan yang dirintiskan oleh legasi-legasi sebelumnya, diteruskan oleh penulis, penunjuk arah mengenai perkara lalu dan dijadikan pedoman untuk masa kini. Membaca dan memahami sejarah perjuangan yang terdahulu itu penting supaya kesilapan perkara yang lalu tidak ulangi. Segala macam praktis itu harus dilihat kembali, digunakan pakai sekiranya bersesuaian dengan keadaan setempat dan zaman.

– Zaidi Musa



Batu Arang 1937 - Kemuncak Kebangkitan Pekerja

Author: Sivarajan Arumugam
Language: Malay
No. of Pages: 71
Price: RM 5

80 years ago in 1937, coal mine workers took over the Batu Arang mines from their British owners and established the first ever Soviet, independent from colonial rule. This brief book written in Malay by Sivarajan, the Secretary General of Parti Sosialis Malaysia attempts to expose the younger generation to the significance of Batu Arang in the workers' struggles in Malaysia.



Speeches in Parliament 2016

Author: Jeyakumar Devaraj
Language: Malay/Mandarin/
Tamil/ English
No. of Pages: 75
Price: By donation

I have tried to use my position as a Member of Parliament to present an alternative analysis of the problems that we are facing this 21st Century, as well as to sketch out a vision of how our society could evolve in a more humane and just manner. There are multiple opportunities to do this, as Parliamentarians have the opportunity to respond to the various legislations that the government presents.

It has been our practice to bring out a compilation of my parliamentary speeches annually for distribution in the Sungai Siput constituency.

Let us together develop those paths that lead to a more inclusive, just and enlightened society.

– Jeyakumar Devaraj

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so comrades
come rally
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us face
the internationale
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